

Graduation Talk To 8th graders and Parents Helen Keller School June 17,1968

It is both by sheer chance and yet not at all accidental that we find ourselves here this evening. We are, each of us and all of us, the children of immigrants who have come to this land. If they had not come, our destinies would be very different. Some of our fathers came recently, and some of us fancy our ancestors as having come a long time ago. But in the light of the history of nations and peoples, all indeed came but a brief, flashing moment ago. We come here tonight with different backgrounds. We come here tonight with different educations. We come here tonight with different beliefs and creeds. And yet, for all those ways in which we differ, we find ourselves here this evening. And in that way, we are not here by chance. We are here because almost all of us have in recent years moved to this prosperous and comfortable suburb of Fairfield County. We have moved here because our economic levels made it possible for us to do so and because we felt that the schools would be good for our children. And we are here because our children happened to be born in a certain calendar year. And so through a mixture of chance and choice, a peculiar combination of circumstances, fate and our own desires, we are here this evening.

And being Americans in this generation, we have choices to make. What are some of those choices and what are some of the Problems that face an average group of parents and children in a Prosperous American suburb gathered to mark and 8th grade Commencement?

The problems and choices are determined by where we stand in our own life cycle, by the place we live in, and the time we find ourselves in.

The young people among us here are entering their teen years. They will be hard, difficult and wonderful years. By the end of them, some of the angular, gawky, young people will be young men and women. You, the parents, you are to be parents of teenagers, and that too

is a hard and difficult task. Indeed, the task is difficult for both, for as the teenager sets out on his way, the parent must gradually let go, and yet not let go too fast, not too slowly, And the task is further complicated by the nature of the world we live in. It is not a world of simple alternatives. The alternatives are complex.

Our country bears a burden in this world- the burden of turmoil at home and violence overseas, that makes the simple process of growing up a more difficult one. We live in a technological age in what must be know makes the education that we are giving our children obsolete in 15 to 20 years. And we are living in an age in which an affluent society has provided diversions and temptations so complex that people may get involved in them before they are ready to handle them. These things make the task of both the teenager and his parents, a difficult one in making one's way through the maze into a significant healthy start to adulthood.

You, the parents, have made more choices then the young people graduating here this evening. You have chosen first to bring your children into this world and that decision entails some responsibility. It will seem with the onset of these teen years, that there is less and less you can do to influence your children.

Nonetheless, you must realize that there is a great deal still to be done, for in the final analysis, they will be more like you then they will be different from you, and that will happen even though they will fight it all the way. Your life and your values will be the touch-stone by which they will measure their growing life and their own growing system of ideals, values, and loyalties. And you have made another choice which determines some of the problems and choices that you face together.

You have chosen to move to a white, well-to-do American community in Easton, Connecticut, and we dare not forget that Easton is not a picture of America, for down the hill in Bridgeport, America looks a great deal different. And the America in which 10% of the population is black and in which 20% may be poor, is not represented here this evening, and this

community is really an enclave in a society that we are told is rapidly splitting into two societies. Easton is to a great degree, a part of the economic entity that is Bridgeport, and yet in the 18th and 19th Centuries this was not so. In the era of different communications and different technology, Easton indeed was a separate area. And yet today, when things have vastly changed, we have an anomaly of the 19th Century. Easton, though organically a part of Bridgeport, finds itself a separate district with a separate school system and indeed, these are some of the reasons that we have moved here and are here thickening. By this strange quirk of history that established borders some place north of the Merritt Parkway, we are different from those who live south of us, and because of this, the central city has been denuded of those who have the greatest amount of talent, energy, wealth and leadership to give it, and so, its very ability to recreate itself. And so we have a well-to-do town in a land in which all the inhabitants are not well-to-do-, and white man's town in a world where people's skins vary as the hues of the sun. We have a town in which the questions are of one acre or two acre zoning in a society in which the issue is how a fatherless child shall grow; whether he will learn to read A,B,C, and whether, if he doesn't, he will like the blind Samson at Gaza, pull down the Temple of the Philistines as he goes to his own death. How are we, the prosperous, the comfortable, to relate to a society such as this. How are we who have avoided the crime, the misery and the squalor of the central city by moving to the suburbs- how are we to deal with those who could not make that move. Is this community, and hundreds of thousands of others like it, to be a fortress trying to keep the winds of what is happening outside the fortress, out, in the hope that the comforts and the coziness inside will remain. I, for one, do not believe that such a fortress mentality can long endure or that the fortress will last. If this community and others like it will be a place where strength will go forward to help others, then there is some hope. The Kennedy family, so recently bereaved, has shown all too well that wealth and affluence need not be self-contained, nor even self-defeating, not cut off from America. Wealth and affluence can extend itself and justify itself by attempting to change the society around it. The Kennedys have had that awareness, that their affluence was to a significant degree, an accident, and that a nation

of immigrants and its descendants who came here so that they might have greater opportunity than they once had, could not turn its back in good conscience on those who came later or differed in ways that mean to a great deal a man and very little to the Almighty. So, this is the first problem and the first choice. Shall we who have made it-shall we take responsibility for our fellow-man, or shall we not. And if you believe along with me that this community is not to be a fortress, and that such a fortress cannot survive, if you believe that men are entitled to equal opportunity, to a fair chance in this world, you cannot hedge your comfortable position in a wealthy suburb of an industrial community by rationalizing your own success and others' failures in terms of their inability to lift themselves by their bootstraps.

I have worked in the P.T.Barnum Apartments in Bridgeport. I have been in some of the impoverished homes of the East Side. There are no bootstraps. But there are children who will grow up with no bootstraps unless we do something. And how they grow, and how their children grow after them, should and must be our concern. We need not be guilty about our wealth and our wealth need not be a barrier- it can be a source of service and energy.

In another way, your children are entering a world significantly different from the world which you, their parents, moved into in your High School and College years. For many of you, the Depression was the great event of your lives. It determined how you would see all things from then on. Jesse Unruh of California pointed out that it was a time that it was not unusual for four brothers to share one pair of shoes. It is hard for a man who saw that and who experienced that, to appreciate the elegance of a barefoot Hippie. You remember what it was when there were no jobs; you remember what it was when people competed for a Civil Service position because it was the only secure thing. You remember what it was for people to sell apples for a nickel, but your children do not know that. They were born into a world financially secure and they have had such security all their lives.

They know no other world, and indeed, the world of the Depression might well as well be ancient history to them, for such security has become an accepted part of their lives, and they experience the world differently. And so, you may have found meaning, and it was real meaning, in becoming something, and becoming something meant acquiring something. It meant financial security- bread to eat, a home to live in, and good things around you. Your children find that period an accepted part of life and they will look for meaning in something other than security and financial affluence. And, indeed, the crucial question for the adult generation is- what new directions of meaning will you find and what directions will you be able to point your children in, that will lead them to finding a sense of meaning in their own lives. We live in a society in which great meanings and great purposes abound. Your task is to point your children in that direction, for indeed, the society around us is crying for help and your purpose must be to find new meaning, to constantly refresh that youthful sense of looking for meaning to the world, what your children have in yourselves. Will you harden with the oncoming middle years? Will you become cynical about man's hope for the future, or will you too be willing to extend your hand in compassion and concern for other Americans around you.

Your children, will in these years be formulating a set of ideals, and they will be testing these ideals against the rock of their family and then going forth and try to live by them. If you believe that all men are brothers, you will then have to act that way. And if you believe that violence is bad in our country, then you will not be able to promote violence by your talk. And if you believe that this country must be concerned, then you must show concern. You can set a tone, you can set a standard. Indeed, if you want your children to be normal, you will have to; and if you do want them to find escape in alcohol, sex or drugs, then you will not be able to use those things as a source of escape yourself.

You, the young people,- you are entering on some of the most exciting years of your lives. At the end of the teen years, you will, as I pointed out before, find yourselves young adults. You will be as different from what

you are today as you can possibly seem to be. And these years are years in which you will begin to find yourselves.

You will test and probe and question all that you have seen. You will find that others are not all you thought they were, and you will find that finding yourself is not an easy proposition. You are going to wonder about your own worthwhileness, about a world that does not keep all the promises it makes, and you will wonder what it is going to be with you. You will, during these years, gradually be able to choose more and more independently, but all of that will not happen at once. It will happen more slowly than you would like, and you will press at the leash and want it to happen more quickly, and yet it can happen no other way. For to break loose to soon, would mean that things would happen faster than would be good. You will be under great pressure to conform during your High School years.

But conformity does not always bring out the best in you, nor does it help you to be what you ought to be. You will want to run with the pack, to go with the crowd, to be a part of the group and to dress like the gang- to look like them, to act like them, and not be different. But gradually you will have to develop the capacity to find and test your inner self, and indeed, to find exactly in what ways you are different. You will have to find out what it is that you yourself should be, and not what it is that others want you to be. Despite this strong desire to conform, to be like the other kids-even in this , you can make a choice. The question is going to be-with what group will you go. You can choose groups in which people are giving themselves to service and to meaning and to purpose; groups in which young people are working at tutoring young children in Bridgeport; groups in which young people are helping the crippled and the lame, -the disturbed and the retarded; by doing this, you can both find yourself and you can share your desire to do something about the world, and you can begin to find a purpose for being on earth. I, for one, have never minimized what teenagers can give to the world. There is a freshness, a newness, and a non-cynicism about you that is a very great gift. Your desire to change the world anew is perhaps God's special gift

to each generation. Now, all of this will not happen in a day, and I suspect that many of you are not feeling it even this evening. But I guarantee you that by the time you are Freshmen and Sophomores in High School, these issues will be real issues in your life, and they will present you with real opportunities. If you use these years, and choose wisely, and do not waste them, they can be some of the best years of your lives.

You will want, in these years, to gradually test your manhood and your womanhood. You will want to prove that you are really becoming an adult, and the question is going to be- how you will test the fact. That you will want to test it, I have no question; and you may mistakenly think that you can test it through alcohol, and then you will find yourself sneaking drinks. But indeed it is only the weak and immature who prove themselves through alcohol. You may think you can test it by driving an automobile faster than it should be driven, and then you might do that and hope to impress everyone. But that too is a self-defeating way. There is a way in which you can prove it. You can prove it by being a man to your fellow-man and a woman to your fellow-woman. You can prove it by helping a retarded child tie a shoelace, helping a youngster to make out some letters of the alphabet, or throwing your arm around an underprivileged kid, and going out to play catch with him.

This country of ours has been described as the last great hope for mankind. It was not described that way because here men could be wealthy. And it was not described that way because people here could live plush and easy lives. It was not the last great hope because here the white man would destroy the red man, exclude the black man, and live happily ever after. It was, and it remains, the last great hope of mankind because here the attempt was to be made to have all men live together. Here the attempt was to be made to give all immigrants who came from lands of persecution, a chance at a new and different world. Here the attempt was to be made for a new life in a land that was un-embittered by the hatred and violence which 2,000 years of Western civilization had passed down to European people. And the question that we and the other

thousands of prosperous communities graduating 8th graders this evening, have to ask is- will this country still be that great hope.

That is very much in our hands. It is in the hands of the parents of children of this and every other town. It depends on our degree of compassion, our degree of foresight, our willingness to serve and to help others, to put our backs to the wheel, to sacrifice and to do. It really depends on what all the Eastons all over the world will do with the energy and the talent that is theirs. And we will know the answer, when we see in 10 or 15 years what the Eastons of this country will look like; and more important, what the Bridgeports of this country will look like.

This school bears the name of a great lady. She was blind, deaf and mute, She struggled through to overcome these problems. That was no easy task. It was difficult to reach out to the world and to experience it without the God-given attributes of seeing, hearing or talking. It was difficult, if not possible, to reach out to see the world, to hear it and to express one's self in it. Yet, if she stands for anything, and if her name on this School means anything, and is to be an inspiration to all who are educated here, or who pass by it on the road, or who bring their children here, she does stand for the fact that it can be done. Indeed, prosperous America often seems blinded by 1 acre zoning and 2 car garages. Prosperous America often seems deaf to the cries of pain that it will not hear until those cries are made clear to us in the crackling sound of our cities burning in the night. And prosperous America remains mute when it should speak out; silent, when it knows what must be done-to act. And this blindness, deafness, and muteness must be overcome. We must learn to see the road ahead and where America must go. We must learn to hear the pain, and we must learn to speak up and to move in new directions, and to act on what we know we must do, though indeed it may involve significant sacrifices for us. We must act in our schools, in our cities and in our homes to bring all men into the dream that is this country, and we must speak and act on behalf of goodness and truth with gentleness, firmness and determination, in an age of violence, bigotry and destruction. Helen Keller's attributes might well be ours in this age. The task, indeed, seems overwhelming.

And yet Helen Keller's personal legacy and inspiration to each of us is that though it seems overwhelming, it can be done. Let us not forget that her mastery of the world and her perception and her understanding of it began with one word. A sage of old once said: "It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but that does not make you free from undertaking it; let us therefore begin."