GOVERNOR MILLIKEN'S ADDRESS
Commencement Exercises, Saturday, May 1, 1982

I am very pleased to be here with you today. This is a most significant occasion for you, and I might add, for me as well. I am honored that you have asked me to share it with you.

After four or more hard years of work and self-discipline, you are to join the ranks of college graduates who are privileged to say they have earned their degree from The University of Michigan.

A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of meeting another of your number--a person who has "gone far," in the most literal sense--Colonel Jack Lousma, commander of the Columbia III space shuttle.

I spent a few hours with him at that time, and it occurs to me now that he is a good example of the caliber of graduates from this university. While he chose a more attention-getting field than most, I think he is rather typical of those who share the distinction of a U of M degree. The value of your education here can be gauged in the sheer number of gradutes who, like Jack Lousma, eventually excel in their fields, the sheer number who bring national recognition for excellence to themselves, to this university and to this state.

Colonel Lousma, of course, is highly trained in an extremely technical field. But the abundance of information he possesses was not the most striking thing about him, nor was it the remarkable experiences he has had, that few of us will ever have. The most compelling quality about this astronaut was his sense of perspective on those experiences--a perspective that was nurtured here at this university and which, I hope, will be one of the enduring qualities you take away from here. The perspective is called education.

The University of Michigan has trained you in the use of your mind's powers. Whatever else it has done for you, this will be the attribute most urgently called upon in your period of history.

As our modern world becomes more complex, the need increases for the kind of education defined years ago by the Frenchman, Auguste Desclos.

"Perhaps the best definition," he said, "would be to say that education is what remains when you have forgotten everything.

"What is it that remains? Many things: the understanding quickened and deepened--a breadth of outlook--a catholicity of sympathies--a refinement of taste--an appreciation of beauty--a delicacy of feeling--a sense of measure--a modesty of judgment--a critical habit of mind--the habit of taking nothing for granted--of thinking for one's self, that habit which is the very soul of liberty--the habit of sincere unbiased approach to any problem and of the undaunted pursuit of its ultimate solution in a real scientific spirit--a proper and balanced conception of the various uses of life, of its graces as well as its utilities. Those are some of the things which remain, some of the elements of that full and rounded life for which we endeavor to prepare our students."

Like each generation, you will face a variety of demands on those powers. First, there will be the need to make a living. In these difficult times, especially in Michigan, I don't doubt for a moment that a job is your first priority, and rightly so. I am told that in spite of a grim economy, this graduating class has been looked upon with considerable favor by those with jobs to offer--a tribute to each of you, your hard work and study, and to your university.

While I am not surprised that graduates with specialized knowledge are much in demand, I was delighted to learn that even the much-maligned liberal arts graduates have had considerable success in job hunting. As you know, the general wisdom holds that the traditional liberal arts major doesn't know how to do anything after graduation. Well I was a liberal arts major and I became Governor. Perhaps there are some who will say "that proves their point."

But the personal task of making a living, as crucial as it is right now, will not be the sole purpose, nor should it be, of what your education has given you. If your occupation becomes your sole preoccupation throughout your lifetime, or if your only interest beyond making a living is in shallow, passive entertainment before a television set or in a stadium, then both you and the society of which you are a part will fall far short of your potential. Both you and society eventually will lose the essence of your freedom, which lies in wisdom, compassion, integrity and responsibility. It is essential that you apply the reasoning power of your minds to the primary issues that face humanity today.

Of course, each generation of graduates is asked to confront the world's problems, but I wonder if there has ever been an array of problems so resistant to solution and so cosmic in scope as those in your hands.

Foremost among them is an issue of undeniable pre-eminence--the nuclear issue. H.G. Wells said many years ago that civilization is a race between education and catastrophe. How prophetic are those words spoken before 1945. It is apparent, but seldom dwelled upon, that the fundamental distinction between this general of citizens of the world and all previous ones is that we have the capacity to destroy ourselves.

Until quite recently, it has been a matter of relative ease to dismiss the doomsayers of the world--to categorize them with eccentrics who parade the streets saying, "The world will end next Tuesday--at noon." Nuclear war was unthinkable; therefore, we didn't think about it.

That has changed, particularly among the young--the young of many nations, most of whom were not even born when the evidence of an atomic bomb's effect was first and last seen by a horrified world.

Modern science dazzles us again and again, with the enormity of our destructive power. Each fresh revelation brings new evidence of how easily we accept it. We rationally make plans to be prepared for events that are beyond reason. We confidently use absurd and meaningless terms like "overkill" and "survivability." How can we do otherwise, we ask. It is only realistic to accept the horror that is well within the realm of possibility.

But a growing number of thoughtful people is questioning that view. They suggest that acceptance merely lends to the increasing weight of inevitability.

I do not know the answers, but I do know it is an issue on which the time for a solution is at hand. It is an issue that must be taken up by minds educated to think, to question and to care. If we do not gain control and soon of the headlong rush of nuclear arms, it will gain control of us and the rush will be to oblivion. We will race lemming-like over the cliff of the world as we know it. The urgency grows. So do the weapons, in number and in deadliness. Unlike most problems, this issue allows no second chance, no margin for error. The world will resolve this problem only once.

While all may seem to pale beside the nuclear issue, there is much else you will be called upon which to consider and commit yourselves to.

For example, in the crush of our economic problems, there has been a perceptible backing away from the commitment of an earlier generation to equality, a perceptible giving in to the arrogant call of special interest, and a perceptible willingness to allow the voices of dissent to be stifled. Influence gravitates to the loudest and narrowest among us who sally forth with mouths open and minds closed.

The leaning toward rigidity and intolerance can create an alarming "them and us" feeling. It often masquerades under the guise of morality, patriotism and other sacrosanct concepts that, in fact, it contradicts.

It implies that no morality worthy of the name American exists outside of that which speaks with the loudest voice and narrowest appeal. Those who disagree, it is made clear, are somehow less thoroughly American. It is the kind of thinking that belittles any patroitism but its own, discredits any faith but its own, and wraps itself in a cloak of red, white and blue infallibility.

Among the most cherished of our values has been an appreciation of diversity. What can we think when, instead, we find so many who are ready to glorify the rebels of our early history, but silence the dissenters of today. To suggest that the rich and the poor, the black and the white, the rural and the urban, possess mutually exclusive views of what is American, is to put the very foundation of our system at odds with itself.

Listen to me now very carefully. It will take a rare courage from all of you to assure that we do not become ruled by the "moral auditors" who tell us what we may and may not think, who tell women what valued rights will and will not remain theirs; who tell citizens what guarantees of a free society will or will not be scrapped in the name of expediency.

These then are some of the issues that require your consideration--your commitment. They require the perspective I spoke of earlier that your fellow graduate, Colonel Jack Lousma, displayed. An ability to see the broad scene as well as the emotion of a particular issue. Such perspective is a large part of the purpose of your education. I don't doubt that you have it. The future awaits your decision to use it.

Norman Cousins once defined that use as our biggest problem. ". . . the eternal and ultimate problem of a free society," he said, "is the problem of the individual who has no awareness of the millions of bricks that had to be put in place, one by one, over many centuries in order for him to dwell in the penthouse of freedom. Nor does he see any special obligation to those who built the structure or those who will live in it after him, for better or worse.

"It is the problem of the individual who recognizes no direct relationship between himself and the decisions made by government in his name. Therefore, he feels no special obligation to dig hard for the information necessary to an understanding of the issues leading to those decisions.

"In short, freedom's main problem is the problem of the individual who takes himself lightly historically--however bloated he may take himself personally."

You have learned much in order to be receiving a degree from The University of Michigan today. I am sure you have been trained in the use of your minds, as well as in the furnishing of them. And how you must make some decisions about what to do with that training, if anything.

John Gardner said that you should be challenged to self-renewal.

"Instead of giving young people the impression that their task is to stand a dreary watch over the ancient values," he said, "we should be telling them the grim but bracing truth that it is their task to recreate those values in their own behavior, facing the dilemmas and catastrophes of their own time. Instead of implying that the ideals we cherish are safely embalmed in the memory of old battles, we should be telling them that each generation refights the crucial battles and either brings new vitality to the ideals or allows them to decay."

The choice will be very much yours in the years to come, and you will have a sufficiency of problems to occupy your talents.

When I spoke with Jack Lousma about his experience as an astronaut, he said that it gave him an unusual perspective, in the literal sense, to look down on the earth from far out in space.

"The earth," he said with a great deal of awe in his voice, "is such a very beautiful planet."

Few of us will ever know its beauty from that particular point of view, but the perspective you bring to the planet's problems at closer range will have everything to do with its condition, its survival and its people.

I congratulate you on your achievement today. You have my best wishes for successful, productive lives--lives that make a difference.

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