

JUNIATA COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by Chaim Potok

May 10, 1992

Well, you made it.

This is the day you've all longed for and dreamed about. What a journey it has been--for you who are graduating, for your families and friends--a journey of years, decades, from birth to this moment. Joys and sorrows; quarrels and composure; sleepless nights; classes, parties, friends gained, friends lost, papers, exams--will I make it? won't I make it?

You've earned the right to this day. You're here.

I'm here, too. On a visit of sorts, you might say.

There is a poem by Robert Frost. It is called "A Time to Talk":

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, "What is it?"
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.

I'm here on a friendly visit. And it is time for us, for all of us, for all of America, to talk.

I had no idea when I accepted the invitation to be here today that this joyous celebration would take place against the background of conflagration. How could I have known that I would receive a letter from a friend of mine who lives in Los Angeles, someone with whom I served in Korea, telling me that his neighbor's garages were destroyed by fire in last week's riots, and he and his neighbor spent, as he wrote in the letter, "an interesting night on

guard with one teacher, one artist, one underwater photographer, one .44 Magnum, one Smith and Wesson shotgun, and a Luger."?

The worst riot in our century, it is being called. In our entire history as a nation, second only to the draft riots in New York during the Civil War.

Yes, yes, I know, we should celebrate. This day of joy should not be marred. What right does an outsider have to come in and spoil things?

But we are not children here. This is not a party for five-year-olds with appetites geared for instant gratification and attention spans suitable only for political sound bytes. You went to college to shed your childhood. This is a commencement, a beginning, indeed the real beginning of your adult lives. You will, I am certain, have your parties later. But now, here, all of us together, this is a time for talk.

Indeed, I should think the day would be marred if we did not talk about the troubled darkness in which our country seems to find itself today.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall," wrote Robert Frost.

So--no walls. Talk.

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What is this land of ours, this United States of America?

In the beginning, matters were clear and simple. English Puritans and Separatists came to these shores to escape a corrupt and menacing England and Europe. Here, the enemy was not malevolent politics and false Christians, not the Pope or Protestants who, in the words of the Puritan Edward Johnson, in 1653, were engaged in "vaine Idolatrous Ceremonies." Here, the enemy was the mighty and desolate wilderness and cruel savages. Here, you did your Christian duty. You established a Christian community, lived a Christian life, and conquered the wilderness. God was English. A Continental reform Christian might have some

trouble believing God was English, but no trouble at all believing He was Protestant. He certainly was white. He certainly was a He.

In the beginning--clear, straightforward, Christian goals. That beginning lasted until the Revolutionary War.

Since then we have been asking ourselves: What does it mean to be an American? What is America?

There have always been at least two Americas.

An America of guns and an America of plowshares.

An America of clenched fists and an America of open arms.

An America of fences and an America of prairies.

An America of terror and an America of majesty.

An America about which one can say, with Lily Tomlin, "I try to be cynical, but no matter how hard I try, I can't keep up." And an America about which one can say, with Abraham Lincoln, "With malice toward none; with charity for all...."

The America of guns conquered the land; the America of plowshares settled the land.

The America of clenched fists made possible the tenacity that pioneer men and women needed to survive Montana winters; the America of open arms welcomed the poor and the wretched of the earth onto these shores.

Which of the two is truly America?

The truth is: Both are.

We are cruel and compassionate at one and the same time; bigoted and benevolent, callow and cosmopolitan, violent and valiant--simultaneously.

We are the tension and the dialectic between those two extremes of our national being.

When Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office at his second inauguration, the inauguration at which he delivered the address containing the immortal words "With malice toward none; with charity for all..."--after taking the oath of office, Lincoln bent forward and kissed the Bible on a passage marked by him in pencil. Chief Justice Chase, presenting the Bible to Mrs. Lincoln pointed to the verses that had been brushed by the lips of the President.

They were from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 5, verses 27 and 28.

The prophet is describing a mighty army doing the bidding of the Lord:

In its ranks, none is weary or stumbles,
They never sleep or slumber;
The belts on their waists do not come loose,
Nor do the thongs of their sandals break.
Their arrows are sharpened,
And all their bows are drawn.
Their horses' hoofs are like flint,
Their chariot wheels like the whirlwind.

With malice toward none--yes. With charity for all--yes. But in the meantime, the war would go on, and the South would be crushed--no matter what the cost.

America--cruel and compassionate, simultaneously.

Yes, we opened these shores to the poor and wretched of the earth. We needed them to fill the factories, settle the West, build the railroads.

Often we do bad things for good reasons, and good things for bad reasons. We destroyed the civilization of the native American in order to advance our own; we create great art for the sole purpose of making money; we become the world's most skillful professionals for the purpose of amassing wealth.

And we flourish because of the differences between us.

I was in China recently. Chinese scholars and politicians talked a great deal about harmony. I tried to explain to them how we in America create by way of response to the tensions, differences, and competitiveness in our culture. They seemed bewildered and dismayed.

It is not difference that will destroy America, but indifference.

When the differences in our culture become such that they are no longer productive; when the tensions begin to eat at the innards

of our being; when the dialectic between the gun and the plowshare cease, and when we gaze at this breakdown with indifference--then it is fire in the streets and friends awake with shotguns and Lugers.

There were cities in this country--Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Chicago--where the streets were quiet. People had labored in those cities--quietly, without fanfare--to overcome the indifference, to maintain the dialectic. To keep talking.

Let me be as blunt as possible about this. In the matter of race, the gun and the plowshare steer us in two quite different directions. The gun leads us to more guns, more violence, more police, more jails, more ruined schools, more emptying of our cities, more hate groups, more separateness, more indifference, more guns, more violence, more police....

Plowshares lead to more talking, more listening, better police-community relations, more self-help, more citizen involvement, an ability to live creatively with difference.

In the matter of race, no dialectic is possible between the gun and the plowshare. We must make a choice. Either/or.

Is it hopeless? Are Americans to be forever enslaved to racism? Is it so deeply embedded in us, this matter of color, that we can see no way out of it?

There are countries on this planet that are not racist, or that somehow manage to translate difference of race into the kind of enraging indifference that leads inevitably to fire and blood. Can we not learn?

We as a nation are in woods now dark and deep. Do we stop here in a helpless torpor of dread, mutual suspicion, hate? Will they say of us in a thousand years: This country had a dream, something about gathering in the poor, the wretched of the earth, something about malice toward none and charity for all, something about showing the world that our species doesn't only consist of warring tribes locked forever in hate and violence--will they say of us: This country had a dream that became a nightmare?

Will the future say that of us?

Or will we learn, finally, that the woods we are in today can be traversed if we learn to listen to one another, talk to one another, respect one another, help one another, choose not for the gun but for the plowshare.

Once we made a promise to the future. "We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal...."

Can we now say of these woods and that promise, in the words of Robert Frost:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Can we say that?

How can we not?