

Commencement Address delivered by Pearl S. Buck at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Lynchburg, Virginia, June 7, 1964. Miss Buck earned her A.B. degree at R-MWC 50 years ago.

YOU AND YOUR MIRACLE - by Pearl S. Buck

In the midst of the excitement and busy changes of this moment in your lives, when you are leaving one stage of experience to begin another, I do not propose to spend time in advice, prophecy, or compliments. I would like instead to consider for these few minutes, you and your miracle. "You" of course I believe to be eternal. Much of the creative thought of philosophers and scientists has been and is being given to research into the subject of the eternal "you." Is there a "you" which inhabits your present body, possesses and is possessed by it? Every civilization, all civilized men and women, have sought to answer this question. For convenience the eternal you, the individual I see in each one of you sitting here before me, and which you see in me, standing here before you, is called by scientists and philosophers - and I include religious persons among the philosophers - the soul. Is there that something permanent in each one of us? Philosophers for the most part incline more and more to answer this question in the affirmative. The working hypothesis is that there is more to you, and to me, than the bodies we inhabit in some fashion that we do not understand, but must accept, because here we are. It cannot be denied that we are here.

Scientists, too, are coming more and more to the conclusion that we are not here by chance. I sat next to one of our greatest biochemists not long ago during luncheon, and in the course of our conversation he told me that whereas, when he was young, he believed in a purely mechanistic explanation of life, the more he studied and experimented in his expanding field of biochemistry, the more convinced he became that a mechanistic universe is irrational and therefore impossible. Intelligence and only intelligence could have conceived

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the gigantic plan of the total universe - a groping, growing intelligence, perhaps, an intelligence still creating, making mistakes, perhaps, even discarding and rejecting, but unmistakably intelligence, and imparting intelligence to that which it creates. We may take as example the increasingly marvellous computers, these metallic miracles, the thinking machines which today men are creating, building them upon established principles of how knowledge accumulates in the human brain through learning and experience and how that knowledge may be used. The computer can do much more than its creator can do. In a few minutes, sorting out its knowledge, it can bring forth a result which a thousand mathematicians working a lifetime can not achieve. Yet who would dare say the computer is greater than the human brain that conceived it? I spent an evening last week with a group of two hundred or so young scientists and we discussed the thinking machine and what it could do - and could not do. We watched a film which explained the latest computers and showed one, in particular, which played a game of checkers with the checker champion of the world. The champion had spent a lifetime on the game, he knew every possible move and principle. The machine was given only half an hour to become acquainted with the input material. The game then began. It was exceedingly close. I could see perspiration on the champion's forehead. He almost lost, but not quite. The machine made all the proper, predictable moves. It was only when the champion made an unusual, unpredictable move that the machine finally failed. The creative intelligence of the champion was all that saved him. All? It was the only thing that saved him. Call it his soul. The machine had no soul. The "you" of you is that soul, the one of "me" is that soul. For all eternity the "you" and the "me" exist, each an entity, but each part of the whole.

I do not propose, however, in this brief space of time, to speak of eternity. Eternity is the unchanging and the unchangeable. It has no beginning and no end. It simply is, and has always been, and always will be. Everything is a part of it. Nothing that is can be lost. Form may change,

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matter and energy are interchangeable, but the stuff of life is, now and forever. What I wish to talk about today, however, is the brief span, the present moment, when you and I have this human form. Here we are, looking more or less alike, some sort of soul stuff, some sort of inextinguishable energy, apparent in a material form we call the body. This body is your present miracle and mine, a miraculous instrument which we possess as a means to express our present being. How did we come by it? We know, of course, the rather simple way in which it was created, the somewhat mechanistic device of egg and sperm. But the first moment when soul became apparent was in the tremendous struggle we call birth. At no time in your life will you make such a fight as you did when you were born, and never will it be as perilous for you again, until you make the next great change, called death. Consider the battle you made, and quite alone, really, when you were born. You were accustomed to a warm protecting shelter. In your prebirth there was only silence. You slept, cradled in your small private sea. You were nourished with no effort on your part. All was done for you. You were physically alive, you were physically growing, but you had no part in it. You existed.

Suddenly everything was changed. Without your permission or even your knowledge you were forced into another stage, or as we call it, world. Your gently moving liquid sea became a dry atmosphere. You had never breathed, but you had to breathe or die. It was the most dangerous moment you were ever to know. Could you suddenly begin to do things you had never done before? The capacities were all in you. They had been given you but could you use them?

Could you use them quickly enough? A few minutes of hesitation, a reluctance, and you would never live. Your lungs were filled with liquid - you had to expel it and breathe. Your voice, silent until now, must be used in a loud cry. Your skin, protected by the prenatal fluid, was now attacked by unfamiliar objects, hard objects. You were moved abruptly, wrapped in harsh material, sustained apparently by nothing and no one. You were totally alone.

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Yet you functioned. You breathed, you cried, you took your food, you survived or you would not be here today. You survived because that will, that energy, that soul which is the you of you, took over the functional mechanism, the physical miracle that we call the body.

I look at you sitting there before me. I see you, and yet what I see is, I know, only the miracle. Invisible is the persisting "you." What will you do with your miracle, I wonder? Again you, the soul of you, must again take command, if you are to progress.

For now, of course, you are about to enter into another stage. You handled the first entry very well. You drew your first breath, you made your first announcing cry, you ate your first meal on your own. You arrived in your world and survived the experience. What sort of world is this into which you enter now? Are you as well equipped for it as you were before? You had lungs, heart, brain, all the vital organs you needed in order to survive in the new world into which you entered. You even had a voice of your own - very important! And you had ears with which to hear the voices of others - equally important! What have you now? Well, you have all you had before and you have learned, at least to some extent, how to use the miracle you possess. You have become acquainted with your body. You know that you must treat it wisely or it will not function properly. Like any machine, it must be taken care of, or it will not serve you. Like any machine, it cannot be allowed to act without guidance or it will destroy you. Uncontrolled electricity is the most destructive force we know. The body is instinct with its own electricity. Take the instinct we call sex. Uncontrolled, it reproduces at random and without mercy to the child who arrives unwanted. When I was preparing this commencement address, I sought guidance of a certain young person in my family.

"What does your generation talk about most?" I asked.

"Sex," she said frankly.

"What about sex?" I asked.

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"Whether to - or not to - " she said frankly.

"That's easy," I said. "Your answer is in the 250,000 children, plus or minus, who are born every year in the United States, homeless and unwanted because they are born out of wedlock. Do you have the right to experiment with sex to such an extent? The answer is 'no'."

Yes, electricity must be controlled and contained within its useful limits or it is a destructive force. You have to know those limits because it can destroy you if you don't. Moreover, merely to know is not enough. You must act upon what you know or you will be destroyed and destroy others. The "you" of you must take command again and face the next stage. Are you prepared?

The whole purpose of education is first to prepare you with essential knowledge for the next stage in your life and then to persuade, coerce and convince you to use that knowledge in the hope that you will not, because of ignorance, be a destructive force to yourself and to others. Of course you will forget details and facts, but all these years of learning in the areas of human knowledge will compel you nevertheless to remember at least where essential knowledge is to be found, or even re-discovered when you need it. Equally of course if you choose to reject all that others before you have put down in the record, if you defend your own ignorance by saying you will learn only by and through your own personal experience, then you are not educated at all and time and money have been wasted on you. For the greatest accumulated treasure we human beings have is not in land or gold, but in the recorded experience of human beings who have lived before us. We begin where they left off, our structure raised upon their foundations. If each generation had to learn only from its own experience there could be no hope of progress for the human race. Put it in another way, the purpose of education is to permit you to start your adult life prepared, strengthened and informed by the experience of previous generations. If you reject this education and choose to begin at the bottom of the ladder, then - well, I suppose at the bottom of the ladder is

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where you belong. It would be a dreary outlook, however, if each generation had to commit over again the sins and mistakes of the generations before.

Happily it is not so. We profit every day by education and in every way. Our bodies are stronger, healthier, live longer because of what we learn from the past, and our brains, encased in our bodies, are better instruments thereby. Our souls, the "you" of you and the "me" of me, become clarified and individualized, growing through education. Curiously enough, it is only in the area of ethics, or morals, it seems, that some persons claim they must learn everything for themselves. Such persons resist the soul's command. Yet wise human behavior, too, is based soundly on the experience of those who have lived before us. The principles of integrity, of loyalty, unselfishness, self-control, personal decency, do not change with time or place. A good man or woman is so defined anywhere in the world. It is only when a generation rejects the wisdom of the past, as Nazism did, as Communism is doing, each setting up its own dogma of belief and behavior, that destruction and confusion take place.

Treasure, then, your education. Use it every day. Let your only regret be that you have not always availed yourself of all its resources. Be sorry that you have not always learned as much as you could have, and resolve in your soul to make amends by forever continuing to learn. For only learning can provide food for the mind and enrichment for the soul. If you wish to live life to the full, continue to read, continue to be curious and to want to know about everything. Yes, everything! Never before has our world been so provident, so exciting, in its revelation of new knowledge, as now. New nations are coming into being, new peoples are emerging out of the past. We are entering upon a glorious age of Renaissance, a fresh mingling of the old - new countries of Asia with the nations of the West. Such mingling has always produced a renaissance. We have every reason to look forward into the future with hope and excitement. Yet never before has a knowledge of history been so essential

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as it is today. How, for example, can we establish a mutually beneficial relationship with Korea unless we know that our history has been closely related to hers for nearly a century? How can we understand India, for example, unless we know enough of the past to understand why India had to reclaim Goa, though by force? What have these matters to do with us, you will ask? They have to do with us. Our sons, husbands, brothers, are fighting and dying in the very heart of Asia today. Upon our soil the United Nations makes decisions daily affecting our lives. Some of your hard-earned money will go to nearly every country in the world.

What is this world of which you and I are a part? It is a world as new as the world in which you took your first gasping breath when you were born. A very new world that was, in which you had left behind the world of the past. Yet it was also a very old world in which the principles of the past experience of other human beings held good for you when you were born. You struggled as generations before you had struggled to be born. You breathed as they drew breath. You found your own voice. You discovered your own nourishment. Yet instinctively you drew on knowledge as ancient as the human race. Only then could you begin your new and individual life.

Thus it is with you now, as you take your place in the new age of our old world. I shall leave you to discover for yourselves what this new age is. I will not give you any advice. I will only suggest that you need not be surprised at anything, or be afraid of anything. I maintain and honestly believe that this is the most glorious and hopeful age that has ever faced any generation. You are lucky. You come to adulthood at a moment when the whole world is awake at the same time. There is not a corner upon this globe where people are not awake and aware. The potentials of the future are incomparable. Let your imaginations soar as you will, and you will reach no boundaries of the impossible. I insinuate only one small warning, since I see that most of you

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are of one color. I remind you that the white race, so-called, is a minority in the human race, a small minority. Less than a tenth of the peoples upon this earth are white. We have our place, but we are a minority group. If we do not know it, the other nine-tenths who are not white do know it. Therefore, as a minority, our power is not and never will be in our numbers or in our military force. Our power, our influence, are and will always be only in the universality of our ideals and the resolution with which we put them into practice - in short, in our souls. Others will follow us, or cooperate with us, only insofar as they trust us to practice our professed ideals - which are also, by and large, human ideals. It behooves us then to remember the importance of the soul, the "you" of you and the "me" of me, for it is in the soul that idealism dwells, and it is the soul that creates the energy called the will, which alone can put ideals into practice.

With this single reminder, I end what I have to say. Fear nothing and no one. Work honestly. Be good, be happy. And remember that each of you is unique, your soul your own, irreplaceable, and individual in the miracle of your mortal frame.

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