

THE COURAGE TO AFFIRM

By Russell Kirk

Editor's Preview: This edition of *Imprimis* is a reprint of the Commencement Address delivered by Dr. Russell Kirk to the Class of 1985 at Hillsdale College. It serves as a refreshing reminder to all of us whose graduation days are long past that we are continually on the verge of new stages in our own lives; that we make and remake our commitment to preserving what T. S. Eliot called "the permanent things" all of the time, and so our futures are just as bright and as full of possibility as the futures of the Class of 1985.

In this stubborn old college and at this pleasant old town of Hillsdale, the young ladies and gentlemen who are being graduated today have enjoyed four years of sanctuary from the hurly-burly of our era; four years of immunity from the violence and fraud of an age that some call "the post-Christian era." That four-year interval of relative quiet made possible the liberal education of the graduates of 1985.

The tranquillity of your Hillsdale years, ladies and gentlemen of the graduating class, is ended for most of you by this commencement: you are commencing the active life. As Aristotle instructs us, the end of man is an action. But it is the tranquillity of the college years that makes possible effective action throughout the lifetime of a graduate.

For the sort of education which most profoundly affects the civil social order, in the long run, is a schooling that lifts the student above ephemeral concerns. The function of the college is not to rouse young people to revolt against the nature of things, but rather to acquaint them with the wisdom of our ancestors. The function of the college is not to promulgate an impractical ideal of human perfectibility, but rather to teach what Unamuno called the tragic sense of life—the greatness and the fallibility of human beings. The function of the college is not to inflame the passions, but rather to lead the rising generation toward right reason.



It never was the duty of Hillsdale College to make its students wise, but only to point out the ways toward wisdom. Hillsdale College has put a walking-stick into the hands of its graduates. What road they choose will depend upon their degree of belief in certain affirmations that Hillsdale College has endeavored to teach.

At Hillsdale, ladies and gentlemen of the graduating class, you have known four years of academic leisure. These years may not have seemed leisurely to you; yet during that time you have had more opportunity for reading books and reflecting upon what T. S. Eliot calls "the permanent things" than most of you will have hereafter. If you have employed that leisure well—and leisure, true leisure, is a world away from idleness—now you can begin to make your mark in the world during the closing years of the twentieth century.

That world, beyond American frontiers, grows daily rougher; it may grow rougher in this country too. Some graduates present here today may find that sacrifices are

required of them. I mean that some may be required to venture much—even life—for the sake of the permanent things. The enemies of the permanent things are in arms today, and they will bear down some of the friends of enduring truth. Yet, as Eliot wrote once, there are no lost causes, because there are no gained causes. In every age, we wage afresh the battle between the forces of order and of disorder. Some present here today will move from success to success. Some of this day's graduates will encounter defeat, whatever their valor. Win or lose personally, if one lives a life of affirmation, he helps to redeem the time.

Nowadays it often requires courage to stand up for the permanent things: to affirm that there exist standards worth preserving, to defend those laws that make possible order and justice and freedom, to witness to the truth. I trust that the graduates of Hillsdale College, defying fad and foible, will find the courage to affirm.

Hillsdale has been a college of affirmations. During the turbulent sixties and seventies, students at nearly all universities and colleges were exhorted—even by commencement speakers—to *protest!* protest against all things established! But the students of Hillsdale then refused to run with those hounds, and the event has justified Hillsdale.

Yet there exists a form of protest worthy of praise; and that is protest against the enemies of the permanent things. To protest eloquently against the destruction of the moral order and the social order is an act of courage and piety in our day. That sort of protest against the enemies of order and justice and freedom has been heard at Hillsdale, and to some effect. So permit me some brief remarks concerning rightful protest in this age when often it seems as if the fountains of the great deep had broken up.

About Russell Kirk

For more than three decades, Russell Kirk has been in the thick of the intellectual controversies of our time. Dr. Kirk writes and speaks on political thought and practice, educational theory, literary criticism, ethical questions, and social themes. The author of twenty-three books and countless periodical essays and short stories, he has addressed audiences on more than 400 American campuses. He has often been a Distinguished Visiting Professor on the Hillsdale campus and is tentatively scheduled to return for the spring semester.

In 1981, President Reagan hailed Russell Kirk for helping "to renew a generation's interest and knowledge of these 'true ideas,' these 'permanent things,' which are the underpinnings and the intellectual infrastructure of the conservative revival in our nation."

If we protest, it ought to be a protest arising out of love, and not out of hatred; that protest ought to be an affirmation that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

That protest ought to be an affirmation of the dignity of man, not an appeal to primitive impulse.

That protest ought to be an affirmation of the ties of family and community, not an enthusiasm for centralized power or for the overthrow of private and public affections.

That protest ought to be an affirmation of the goodness of God's creation, not a denunciation of the life-impulse.



That protest ought to be temperate and patient, not an inciting to violence.

That protest ought to be undertaken in humility, not in the self-righteousness of the Pharisee.

That protest ought to reunite the generations and the classes, rather than becoming a declaration of war to the knife.

That protest ought to ask for the recognition of moral authority, and not for the casting of every person upon his private petty resources of intellect and appetite.

And that protest ought to be promulgated in the name of the permanent things, rather than being a shriek amidst the winds of doctrine.

Protest which ignores these aims and limits is no better than the howl of the fanatic. That howl echoes through the world today; it has been raised recently upon some campuses, in crazy protest against the President's visit to a German graveyard, in frantic demand that South Africa be reduced to the happy condition of Uganda or Chad. Before the stony idols of Unreason and Devastation, the modern mob bows down. Unreason often seems fashionably clever, and Devastation has its charms for the bored and the hopeless. It requires courage to speak up for the truth, in this time of troubles which is our age.

In revolutionary times, Tocqueville says, madness may

not be a handicap; indeed, it may become a positive advantage, leading to a temporary success. But the ephemeral triumph of the eccentric in politics and morals is the ruin of the permanent things, and perhaps the destruction of us all.

With courage, then, let us protest against the follies of the time; let us affirm that you and I are part of a great continuity and essence, joining the dead, the living, and those who are yet unborn. But in finding courage to affirm the truth of the permanent things, let us abjure the fell power of ideology.

This word "ideology" does not mean political theory, or political principle. It means political fanaticism: obses-

The friend of the permanent things affirms that life is worth living, whatever life's tribulations; that being is better than non-being.

He affirms that we profit mightily from the wisdom of our ancestors; and that if we are wise in our generation, it is only because we draw upon the intellectual and moral capital of past generations.

He affirms that the political system under which we live, here in America, is in essence a good and just order, out of which arises our freedom; that no ideologue could create a better pattern of politics than the pattern we have developed in our historical experience.

He affirms that our prosperous economy is the result



sion with rigorous and merciless political dogmas. The ideologues are the men whom the historian Burckhardt calls "the terrible simplifiers."

Coined in the first years of the nineteenth century, this word "ideology" signifies the notion that mankind can be governed by abstract political formulas, regardless of a people's historical experience, and notwithstanding the complexity of human affairs. Ideology is the negation of politics as the art of the possible. The ideologue sets up a sham religion and promises salvation—not salvation through grace in death, but salvation here and now, through violent revolution. The ideologue cries, "Follow me, and I will lead you to the Earthly Paradise!" But no Earthly Paradise exists, or can exist. It is entirely possible, nevertheless, to contrive an Earthly Hell. Once in power, the ideologue becomes the humanitarian with the guillotine. For this ideologue, in the line of George Orwell, is the man who "thinks in slogans and talks in bullets."

The ideologue affirms a set of fanatic abstractions. But the friend of the permanent things affirms faith in the long experience of mankind, under God. He has the courage to affirm that much in our civilization is worth sacrificing for. Let me suggest some of these permanent things defended by people who know that we were not born yesterday.

of private property and economic liberty, and that the ideologue would reduce us to poverty and servitude.

He affirms that we improve our civil social order through the exercise of right reason and moral imagination, not through hatred and violence.

He affirms that our moral order is the product of the blended wisdom of prophets and philosophers, and is sustained by many centuries of trial; that no ideologue's fanciful scheme of moral perfection can supplant successfully the moral ideas and customs which are interwoven with our whole culture.

He affirms that civilization is better than savagery, and that the truly human person is something higher than the beasts that perish.

To affirm such truths, in a time of passion, may not make the friend of the permanent things popular; yet that affirmation makes him a power for good. If some of us do not courageously affirm these truths, the order of the soul and the order of the republic must decay.

So it is you whom I attest, this year's graduates of Hillsdale College. I pray that you may find the courage to affirm your faith in the permanent things, and to resist steadfastly the grim powers of political fanaticism and moral dissolution. In your work and by your example, all of you can accomplish much to redeem the time.

The revolutionary ideologue, having laid waste the gardens of this world, marches with his dupes at his back straight into the madhouse; and the gates clang shut behind them. But I think that few Hillsdale graduates will follow the ideologue. Life is for action, indeed; your own action is only beginning; and I do wish you all Godspeed in a work of intellectual and moral and social recovery. If you find the courage to affirm, there may not be said of our nation and our civilization what has been said of so many others: "And that house fell; and great was the fall of that house."

You are prepared to affirm some truths; for if you have been tolerably attentive during your Hillsdale years, and have studied reasonably well, you have learnt something of the body of knowledge most relevant to our time of troubles. Human nature being a constant, the most relevant things are discerned by men and women of genius in many different times and countries. The thought of St. Augustine or of Pascal, for instance, is far more relevant to the concerns of our time than is the typical neoterist course in "non-Western studies." The calm analysis of Tocqueville is more relevant to our present discontents than are the antics of the latest demagogue taken up by the mass media. Those who immerse themselves in the mere process of this month's events become the prisoners of time and circumstance.

Your more frequent memories of Hillsdale College, ladies and gentlemen, may conjure up images of talking and courting, of walking streets lined with fine trees, of games won, of curious old houses and professorial oddities, of the whole atmosphere of a venerable college on a humane scale. You will do well to recall such experi-

ences and sensations, now not to be encountered on the typical mass-campus to which the average American undergraduate is condemned. You have been given four years of happy opportunity to form your mind and your character, under circumstances that have become unusual.

Yet beyond all these pleasures and sentiments, Hillsdale College has held out to you the possibility of becoming a full human being. I mean that Hillsdale offered you the opportunity to acquire what Aristotle called "intellectual virtue": that is, true strength of mind. To some degree, if you are being graduated today, you accepted that opportunity and disciplined your intellect. You may forget the details of much that you were taught by your professors or in books; but almost certainly you will retain something of what Newman called "a philosophical habit of mind." That is Hillsdale's chief enduring gift to you.

So I do counsel you, ladies and gentlemen, to summon up your courage and strike more than one blow, as the years pass, on behalf of the permanent things. Armored by intellectual virtue, you may be surprised to find how much one human being can accomplish. Hillsdale is a little college in a little county town; yet conceivably Hillsdale may move mountains; for, as Napoleon Bonaparte put it, "Imagination rules mankind."

It will be through your words and your deeds that Hillsdale College works for the renewal of our heritage of order and justice and freedom. We trust that you go into the world to build up, not to pull down. Affirm strongly, ladies and gentlemen, your belief in the things that endure—affirm it here in Hillsdale, and everywhere.



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