

The Freedom to Become

J. RICHARD CLARKE

Brothers and sisters, it is a sincere thrill to be here. I give a special welcome and recognition to those from the Meridian Idaho Stake in the Boise area whom I learned to love and appreciate. Some of the most cherished books in my library are the compilations of your *Speeches of the Year*. Now to be a contributor to the 1977 volume is, I do not mind telling you, a very humbling experience. And I certainly pray most earnestly that I might make a positive contribution to the spiritual content of this year's volume.

Communication is difficult at best. I recall a situation with Adlai Stevenson campaigning across the country. An overzealous and enthusiastic well-wisher, following his speech, came up and said, "Oh, Mr. Stevenson, I was so thrilled at your speech; it was simply superfluous."

He said, "Thank you, Madam, I'm thinking of having it published posthumously."

And she said, "Oh, good; the sooner the better."

Along that line, I heard of a couple of BYU students discussing the difference between ignorance and apathy—you have perhaps heard that mentioned over your scholastic career. One asked the difference; the other one said, "I don't know and I don't care."

Now this represents the twenty-fifth anniversary of my graduation from BYU. The son who patiently waited to be born until the night following the due date of our term exams is sitting here on the front row as a student. We appreciated his thoughtfulness in waiting until the term papers and exams were out of the way before he came into the world. I make no attempt to conceal my pride as an alumnus of this great institution. It certainly has to be, without question, the most unique institution for higher learning in the world. And just a few years ago I purchased a class ring—glad to see they still made them going back that far—which I wear with real pride. It serves as a reminder of the obligation which I feel to uphold the standards of this great institution.

One of my most prized possessions was given to me by the vice-president of our company—a wonderful man who is not a member of the Church. He presented me with a personally created coat of arms. I brought it here

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today. You cannot all see this, but it is made of emblems, selected and arranged in order of priority, which he had observed from our many years of close association—emblems of religion and family, our business profession, and self-improvement. It is really quite frightening to have someone, not a member of the Church, watching you and observing the priorities of your life and then molding a coat of arms indicating what that appraisal reflected. I have pondered this experience many times since that occasion. Perhaps you would like to be reminded of the origin, as I understand it, of the coat of arms, because it came to me rather forcibly.

A coat of arms is granted to a family by the head of the government or the crown by official proclamation, not given by right or sought for by application. It is awarded to the title holder or the head of the family. Although inherited by the eldest son and passed on through generations from father to eldest son, the coat of arms is granted only to worthy bearers. The right to use the coat of arms must be continually granted by the Crown for use on battle flags and gates and turrets and doors of the castle, the home. It is a seal of official documents. That ensign which is recognized by friend and foe is representative of its bearer—his creed, his character, and his commitments. And that is why I felt humbled at this gesture of kindness.

The story is told that when Leonardo da Vinci resolved to paint the Last Supper, he threw all of his energies into the work. He labored diligently; he spared no pains. He studied and probed and pondered the New Testament, which related the experience of the Master and recorded the first sacramental feast, in order that he might do his best to realize and to reproduce this great, memorable scene. After it was finished he invited a few very close friends, whose opinions he valued very highly, to critique the work that he had done. They gazed upon it with great concern and attention

and then one of the critics viewing it spoke with great admiration of the golden chalice on the table at which our Lord and his disciples sat. He said, "Its shape, its color, its size, its symmetry—it represents all that could be desired." Then he said, "This is the most beautiful object in the painting." At this time da Vinci surprised everybody: he picked up a brush with black paint and immediately stroked across the face of the canvas. And then he said, "If what you tell me is true, then my picture is a failure, for I meant my Master's face to be the chief and most beautiful object." This reflects so much of life as it is. As we invest our lives and our talents, let us be sure that these investments reflect the highest of our intentions.

We observe so often that husbands invest the best of their talents in their occupations or in their extracurricular activities. If you should ask them, "What is the intent of your greatest interests?" they would say, "My family, of course." And so it is in so many other experiences. We invest the sacred hours that are afforded to us, only to look back over the years and say that our lives have not been invested in what we really intended them to be. Maxwell Anderson has his character, Joan of Arc, stimulate us with this statement:

*Every man gives his life for what he believes.
Every woman gives her life for what she believes.
Sometimes people believe in little or nothing. . . .
Our life is all we have, and we live it as we believe
in living it, and then it's gone. But to surrender
what you are, and live without belief—that's more
terrible than dying—more terrible than dying
young. [Joan of Lorraine, act 2, interlude 3]*

I am indebted to BYU for many things, but foremost, I suppose, for my exposure to the learning experiences and the friendships that expanded my view of the world and of myself. You are engaged here in a great partnership, as I see it, in learning, with more than a spectator

responsibility. Judson Ward, vice-president of Emory University, said in a recent speech:

We tend to over-emphasize the role of the teacher to the neglect of the learner. Too often the teacher is portrayed as a potter seated at the wheel, molding the mind of the student, producing a finished product. The great teacher is better compared to a gardener. He nurtures, cultivates, and stimulates a mind and spirit to grow according to its own unique potential. Great teachers use their talents to arouse students to action. They cajole, taunt, provoke, flatter, inspire or whatever they think will work to send the learner to the library, to his books, to the laboratory, the computer, the field or bedside in order to test hypotheses, clarify issues, satisfy curiosity, or whatnot. Great teachers themselves continue to learn and share the excitement of learning with students. Teachers and students interact as a community of scholars. [Judson C. Ward, Jr., Vice-president, Emory University, September 23, 1976]

Some months ago I spent a week at a management seminar in Atlanta, Georgia. One of the guest lecturers was Dr. James Gill—a remarkable individual. He heads the Department of Health Services at Harvard University. He spent twelve years in preparation as a Catholic priest, went on to medical school to become a physician, and then pursued a specialty in psychiatry. He made the comment that, to many people, we are living in a time that is considered the age of entitlement. He said that all his life somebody was trying to make something out of him. His parents were trying to make a good boy out of him, his teachers were trying to make a good student out of him, his coaches were trying to make a good ball player out of him, and, in the military service as a navy pilot, they were trying to make a good pilot out of him. He went to Marquette University, and addressing that freshman class on the opening day the head physician said, “You want to be a doctor? You

want to be a good doctor? All right, if you’re successful, this is what will happen. First of all you will have to spend at least four hundred hours in the library. You will have to cut up a cadaver at least once a week until you know every joint, every muscle, every bone contained in that human body. We have one of the finest faculties of anatomy anywhere in the United States. You will have to pick their brains and seek them out to try to gain from their experience. Now you should understand something,” he said. “We don’t check on you to see if you’re attending class. If you want to stay home and sleep that’s your business. We won’t call your folks There are so many people waiting to take your place here that we couldn’t care less whether you attend class or not. And so, just remember that sometime you will have to certify as a doctor. You will have to pass some very stiff boards, and you must use every resource you have in order to make it.”

Dr. Gill said, “For the first time in my life I realized that somebody had put the monkey squarely on my back and I was almost entirely responsible for the results. I don’t mind telling you I was pretty frightened, but I was also thrilled and provoked by the opportunity.”

Brothers and sisters, we hear a lot about rights these days. Everybody apparently has a right to be born healthy, a right to read, a right to be educated, a right to be employed, a right to be free, a right to be happy. But have you ever been endowed with a right without being at the same time saddled with a responsibility? Edward Opitz made a comment which I like very much. He said, “Life’s alternate responsibilities of reward and punishment imply that men must choose. And because the universe does not jest, it has not given man the freedom to make a choice as to how he will commit his life without at the same time equipping that choice with the power to affect the ultimate outcome.” He tells of a hillbilly preacher who put it very simply but very well when he said, “Now de Lord is votin’ fo’ ya, and de devil is

votin' against ya. De way you vote gonna decide de election."

Another Southern friend of mine says that everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.

I thank God for the blessings of free agency and the opportunity to become whatever we want to become as we learn the laws that govern the blessing that we seek. And surely it's incumbent upon those of us so abundantly blessed to extend our hand and resources to those whose opportunities are limited. But we must never deny them the divine right to grasp those opportunities. As one great Indian football player from Washington said, "The minorities must rise above their environmental problems, but we will never be able to do it as a group. Each one of us must climb the ladder one at a time." We're so fortunate to have this great attitude as a Mormon legacy.

Last month I heard one of the most astounding stories I have ever heard. I sat in an audience as we were electrified by a young juvenile court judge in Los Angeles, whose name was Joseph Sorentino. He has written a book entitled *Up from Never*. He told us this incredible story. His home in Brooklyn was the scene of three pool halls in four blocks, rampaging street gangs, and Mafia killers. By the time he was twenty he had served time in the reformatory, the jail, the brig, and a padded cell for incorrigibles. He flunked out of school four times, went through thirty jobs, and was booted out of the Marines. That's quite a record by age twenty. The second oldest of seven children, Joe's constant desire was to acquire a "rep," or become known. A dropout with no skills, he turned to professional boxing but then quit when he found that his mind was being eroded by heavyweight poundings.

One night, passing Brooklyn's Erasmus Hall High School, he noticed a sign that invited passersby to register for night school. At that moment Joe realized, "My only chance for a better life is through education." He enrolled.

He fell in love with learning and graduated with the highest average in the history of the night school. He then enrolled in the University of California at Santa Barbara, became president of the student body, and graduated magna cum laude.

He reenlisted in the Marines to remove another blemish from his record. After an honorable discharge, he entered Harvard Law School, from which he graduated in 1967 as the valedictorian of his class. He said, "You can't imagine how I felt looking down over the pulpit and seeing Henry Kissinger and some of the Kennedys and other notables of government sitting on the front row, and me delivering the valedictory address." In this address he recounted the story of his life and then he ended with these words: "Do not look for tragedy or trauma to explain this change. It was mainly a resolution from within." And then he concluded, "I come here today not just to tell my story, but to emphasize that in America we can make such things possible."

My brothers and sisters, life is not, as some people believe, like a slot machine in which we put as little as possible, always hoping to hit the jackpot. It is rather a careful, intelligent investment from which we receive in terms of what we put in. We must have the faith in the great God of Heaven, who declared, "Thou mayest choose for thyself" (Moses 3:17). Not only must we make the right choices and the best choices, but we must be willing to change and to improve, to recognize that we may indeed change our lives if we have incentive enough and faith enough.

Now may I conclude by sharing one of my favorite stories told by a great American educator, Dr. Kenneth McFarland. Dr. McFarland was the superintendent of schools in Coffeyville, a small Kansas community. They had a very interesting tradition in that small town: they had the commencement exercises for the junior college and the high school at the same time. It had grown over the years to become a

marvelous event. They held it at the football stadium and it was not uncommon that they had four or five thousand spectators and students all in that football stadium attending the commencement. The last year that he was there, the day before commencement, Dr. McFarland was in the dean's office going over some matters with the dean and into the office came one of the very lovely, beautiful young graduating students. She was one of the most popular on campus, a student leader, and a smart girl with a fine scholastic record. This was her concluding year in that junior college. He heard her say that she wanted one ticket for the parents' section; she paid for her cap and gown, and then she left. Her name was Nancy Hollingsworth. Dr. McFarland concluded his business and stepped out into the hall. Waiting for him there was Nancy, and she said, "Dr. McFarland, I've wanted to talk to you for some time about something that's been on my mind, but I simply haven't had the courage because it really is kind of a personal thing. But," she said, "I have a story I'd like to tell you and see if there's something that you can do to help me."

He said, "She told me a fascinating story of how her father was an engineer on the railroad and how he had been killed. She and her two older brothers, in the early years, were raised by their mother, who was employed in a ladies' ready-to-wear shop." She said that some of the very happy moments of her life were in the evening following dinner after they had dressed in their pajamas.

"We could talk about anything we wanted to talk about at this time. Mother would tell us stories and we'd laugh. I can remember as though it were yesterday, a time when we were sitting there and we got to laughing. I developed cramps in my stomach and it was so much pain that Mother had to rub my stomach to relax the muscles. She finally tucked us in bed, kissed us good-night, and went to her bedroom. I don't know what happened,"

Nancy said. "During the night Mother died. We woke up on the morning and, of course, were hysterical. We didn't know what to do. The only living relative we had in the area was Mother's bachelor brother, Uncle Ben. Mother didn't want people to know about her brother because he was the town drunk. About the only time he worked was when he ran out of whiskey. He would work to get enough and then go on a long 'binge.' But," she said, "we loved him so much because he seemed to have plenty of time for us kids. He was the only one we could turn to. So we called him on the telephone and he came right over. We said, 'Uncle Ben, what are we going to do?' and he said, 'I don't know, kids, but whatever it is it won't be as good as you had. But when things quiet down a little bit after the funeral, I'll go down to the court and if you kids want to come and live with me, I'll pray God to give me the gumption to try to raise you right.'"

Nancy said, "Dr. McFarland, you just can't know what kind of a job he's done. In all those years he has never touched one drop of liquor. In all those years he has never missed one day's work. Everybody's got to feel bad sometime, but if he felt bad, he didn't tell us because he never missed a day's work." Then she said, "Tomorrow is the sixth commencement he has attended. My oldest brother Jim is a medical doctor and he is in his residency now. Tom graduates this spring from MIT as an engineer, has had some wonderful job opportunities, and is going to take one. Tonight I'm graduating with a junior college degree and then I'm going to Pittsburgh Teacher's College to become a teacher. So this is the sixth graduation that he has attended and not once has he been willing to sit in the parents' section. Each time we ask him why, he says he just doesn't think it's the proper respect for Mom. So this is my last chance, Dr. McFarland. I've got a ticket for the parents' section but he won't accept it. After you've introduced the parents and you have them stand," she said, "is there something

special that you might do to recognize Uncle Ben?"

Dr. McFarland replied, "I'd have been very disappointed if you hadn't shared this with me. You just leave this to me and I'll figure something out."

The graduation was wonderful. There was just enough breeze to float the flags. The students looked wonderful in their robes; the college students came in first, and then the high school graduates came in and sat down. They had the band playing "Pomp and Circumstance" for the processional. As the band faded out, the orchestra came in and picked it up. As they faded out, the organ came in. For the grand finale, when the graduates were all seated, the band, orchestra, and organ came in together and filled the air with vibrant notes. Dr. McFarland went through the introduction and then, as usual, the parents stood up and were recognized with a big hand of applause. He then looked down on the second row and there was Nancy, sitting with a face about a foot long. She thought that he'd forgotten. But he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I want all the Uncle Bens in the audience who have a graduate representative in the graduating class to please stand." Suddenly a hush went over that audience. He said, "I knew I'd really hooked on to something big. But nothing happened." Finally he said, "Surely with an audience this size there has got to be at least one Uncle Ben who has a representative in the graduating class. We will not proceed with this commencement exercise until he stands." And then slowly, up on the back row, way up near the top of the bleachers, a tall, gangly figure began to stand. Kids on the top row of the graduating class were expecting it and were the first ones to clap. That triggered a gigantic applause from the entire stadium until it rocked all the chairs and those who were sitting there. They knew more about Uncle Ben than he thought they knew. He seemed so

embarrassed that he was telling people to sit down.

Commencement exercise continued and after the graduates were dismissed, everyone came together and began to shake hands as they usually do. Down the middle row came Nancy Hollingsworth, dragging a very reluctant Uncle Ben. As they approached the stand, Dr. McFarland came down and said, "I am so happy to meet you, sir. I have two questions which I must ask you. First of all, what were you thinking when this gigantic applause roared through the stadium?"

Uncle Ben began to laugh and said, "Well, to tell you the truth, I thought I was dreaming. I said to myself, if I'm dreaming I must be asleep. And if I'm asleep, I'm going to be missing Nancy's graduation and I'd better get going."

Dr. McFarland said, "Now the second question is—and I've given a lot of thought to this—what did you tell the authorities when you went down to get permission to take over the kids? You didn't have a very good case, did you?"

Uncle Ben replied, "Doc, I don't mind telling you that I didn't have a case at all. But the judge asked me"—of course they were well acquainted—"Ben, why should I give you the kids?" I looked right at him and I said, "The Master said a man can be born again. He said that a man can change and he can stay changed—can change completely. And I believe that he meant *any* man can do that, even a drunken ne'er-do-well like me."

"The judge took off his glasses, and he turned around and looked out the window for a few moments, and then he said, 'I believe that deal included you, Ben. We're going to turn the kids over to you. You take them home, and in thirty days we're going to come out and see how you're getting along. If you're doing a good job tending the kids and providing for them, we'll leave them with you. But if you

aren't, then we'll have to take them and find another home for them.'"

"Those three kids went with me back to my house, and we knelt down the very first thing around my bed. I promised God that if he'd hold on to me, I'd hold on to the kids. The *five* of us have been getting along real good ever since."

Now brothers and sisters, we sometimes give a lot of lip service to the meaning of change. Most of us do not really believe that it is possible in our case. We think that we have unusual circumstances about our lives, and we alibi our way around building the resistance that is necessary to overcome the habits. Habit is the enemy of change and we must deal with the habits we have accumulated. But my testimony to you is that our Creator, our Heavenly Father, has endowed us with great potentials that we are not aware of. We must grasp our opportunities and we must do all that we can

to bring about the changes so that we might realize the foreordained blessings, the divine rights, and the great opportunities that God has given us. I bear witness to you that the gospel is true and that Jesus is the Christ, the author of our eternal salvation, and our great exemplar for change and for perfection. I further testify to you that Spencer W. Kimball is one of the most choice of all the Lord's prophets who have ever been privileged to come to this earth. How very fortunate we are to live at a time when this noble man is able to be with us and to set such a great example of those principles that we are talking about today. His entire life has been dedicated to the process of change and improvement that he might more fully fulfill his stewardship. That we may have a similar incentive and the power of our Heavenly Father to bring about those changes which we desire, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.