

Earl Hamner's Commencement Address

Delivered at the University of Cincinnati, Saturday, June 14, 2008

Members of the graduating class of 2008, parents, professors, friends, and guests: Thank you for this warm welcome. It's a great pleasure to come back to a university that I love and to a city I love. Both have been most generous to me and I am grateful. I want to share this honor with someone who has supported me and shared my life and my labor for the last 54 years, my wife, Jane Hamner. Jane, will you please stand?

I'm sorry to say that I can't depend on my memory any longer so I'm going to have to read what I want to say. I went to see my doctor not long ago and said, "Michael, I'm 85 years old. I can't remember names of people I've known all my life. I come into a room and wonder what I came there for. And last week I got lost in the front yard. I'm worried I might be getting Alzheimer's!" Michael is a Hollywood doctor, and he likes to put a happy face on everything, so he said, "Hell, Earl, that's not Alzheimer's. You're just getting senile."

It was here that I was given the tools that were to open the door to a career in radio and television that has lasted over half a century.

When I graduated from CCM in 1948, I was so well prepared that I went straight from graduation to a job on the writing staff at WLW. When I left that job to spend full time writing a novel, the vacancy was filled by Rod Serling.

In Hollywood, we writers, actors, and directors spend a lot of our time at ceremonial dinners where we tell each other how wonderful we are and give each other awards. At those dinners, Rod would introduce me as the man who gave him his first job. To his credit it was Rod who gave me my first job in Hollywood on his series *The Twilight Zone*. I wrote a good many of the early episodes.

I received a lot of compliments on those scripts, except from one person. Admittedly the stories were pretty far out, but my mother-in-law found them downright weird. After she had watched four or five of my stories, she wrote my wife a note saying: "I do hope that Earl is not smoking any of that awful green stuff."

Mostly throughout my career I've written about so-called common people. I don't really know any common people. But I do know a good many uncommonly fine people.

Because I have written mostly about family and family values, in the film industry there is an image of me as a man on a white horse galloping down Hollywood Boulevard shouting, "Motherhood, the flag, God, and country!" I promise you I have never done that.

What has inspired my work has always been the family and neighbors I grew up with back in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They were decent, God-fearing, patriotic people. Like most Appalachian folk, they were frugal, proud, and self-reliant. To write about such people, it was inevitable that such stories deal with love and honor, pity and pride, compassion and sacrifice. And so much of my writing became a celebration of those traditional American values.

Some would have us believe that these values no longer have meaning, that they are quaint,

outmoded relics of an older time. I believe they are more alive and well than our films and television and newspapers would have us believe.

We would be foolish to deny that news stories of drugs and deception, scandal and crime capture the headlines. But that is not the America that I know nor is it the country I believe most of us know and honor. I believe that there is more compassion than crime in our country, that there is more hope than heroin, more virtue than violence, more good than evil.

You are facing a world that is deeply troubled. This is an occasion for celebration so I won't cast gloom on it by reciting the challenges ahead. But let's face it: change **is** in the air.

As tomorrow's leaders you will hopefully be movers in change that will bring us peace in the Middle East and return our country to its position of leadership and respect in the world—and that here at home we can turn our wealth and our energy into helping the needy, rebuilding our decaying infrastructure, and providing health and education to every citizen, especially to our veterans as we bring them home.

In preparing for this day, I asked myself if I have learned anything of value that can be helpful to you in the days and years ahead, and a poem came to mind. "Elegy for Jody" was written by a friend from Auburn, West Virginia named Muriel Miller Dressler, and I would like to quote from it:

O, wear a crimson shawl, my child,
Put on a scarlet hood,
And make a point of being brave
When you explore the wood.

. . .

When dark clouds scud against the sky
And greening trees are gone,
I'll weave for you an ebon rug
For you to walk upon.

Then child, don heavy armor
Against the heart's wild pain;
Try as I may, I cannot bring
Fair April back again.

Muriel, of course, is advising a young person who is about to enter the wood of life. I thought back over my life. I looked for some guidance that could arm you who are about to enter that wood, that world. And then it came to me that you are already armed.

You are a citizen of the greatest country in the world, with all the rights and protections and opportunities this great country can provide. You are armed by the fact that you are here today. You have worked long hours to get here, studied hard, extended yourselves, applied yourselves, and you have reached a significant plateau. I hope you take pride in that.

You are armed because you have spent these last years being groomed by a wise and caring faculty. They have provided you with the knowledge and skills to find and secure a place for yourselves, no matter how high the goals you aim for. You are armed by the support and love of

your parents, who have nurtured your growing up and have stood beside you, supported and encouraged you during these challenging college years.

You are armed, too, with the blessing of youth. Oh, what a gift. Glory in it. Savor every minute of it.

The parents of my generation handed us a world that was recovering from a depression only to be engulfed by a world war. We are handing you an equally uncertain world, but I know you can handle it.

Go with the blessing of all of us who have gone before you. You are our hope for and our promise of a better world.

Do me one favor: I urge you, please don't get on a white horse and go galloping down the main street of your town shouting, "Motherhood, the flag, God and country!" You will look a little silly. You might even get yourself arrested.

But I do ask you to keep those traditional values in a quiet place in your heart, and remember that they have sustained us as a country and a people for over 200 years. Congratulations. And Godspeed.