

Last spring, the senior class elected Peter Jennings, professor of the Year. He is a soldier and a scholar. As a marine. He fought in the Gulf, in Iraq and in the Afghan wars. He won several medals, including the Bronze Star, with the all important V for valor on it.

I know a couple of people who are good friends of mine who won the Bronze Star, and they're always careful to point out mine doesn't have the V. So to get it, you have to risk your life. He's taught at West Point at the University of Santa Clara before he came here.

His degrees are from Miami, Michigan State and a Ph.D. in management from Arizona State. When teaching business, he teaches how to conduct commerce honorably. When teaching war. He teaches us how to fight honorably. When giving advice on how to live, which he does to me.

And I've seen it too. Do many others. It always has a mention of honor. He's the chaplain of the football team and he prays for honor. I've heard him do it. This is a man who cares about honor.

He's writing a history of the college's military service in the past. He's discovered a fourth medal of Honor from among our graduates. It's a roll of honor, and he joins it and helps to preserve it. He's married to Roberta, who's sitting right over there somewhere.

Where's Roberta? She laughed. You are. And Maribelle, how are you, Maribelle? Are you proud of your dad or are you bored with him? The Jennings family and Peter are a blessing to us all. Please welcome the Professor of the Year.

*-----Speech begins here-----*

Springtime. Everything is in bloom or soon will be, we hope—this is Michigan.

Spring is the season for new beginnings. It is a time to be born, to plant, to build, to bloom; it is a time to laugh, to dance, to embrace, to love, to marry. And is it time for you seniors to graduate this college and commence your lives as independent, self-governing citizens.

I look about this senior class, our 170th, some 300 strong. I know many of you from class, from football, food and fellowship gatherings at my house, with my family—Roberta, Maribelle, and everybody's favorite, Lucas. Such fond hopes, such good dreams, and grand ambitions you have. Now, at last, it is the springtime of your life; that liberty that you have longed for and that you have so earnestly labored these four years is finally upon you. The time to commence your pursuit of happiness has come.

So on this, your final convocation, I think it fitting to put to you one last question, a question of character. Take a moment here, now:

“Look about you! Behold the beauties of the world, consider the opportunities of achieving greatness; of accomplishing the dreams of your fondest dreams, the possibilities of consummating your most exalted ambitions; consider well these things, and then ask yourselves this question. What consideration, what influence, what power

could induce you to yield up such hopes, such ambitions, such possibilities, simply for the nation's good?"

If you had to answer that question—here, now—what answer would you give? Would you be willing to forfeit the springtime of your life for your country? What, if anything, would make you willing to risk everything—your pursuit of happiness, your liberty, even your life—simply for the nation's good? Such a hard question—dark, grave, out of sync with the bright, hopeful spirit of this commencement season. Why do I put it to you?

In point of fact, it is not me, but a fellow student asking the question. Charles P. Lincoln was his name. He was one of 353 men and 230 women who sat where you sit now, in the springtime of his life, on the eve of graduation—161 years ago, in that fateful spring of 1861.

Go back to that time; recall the events. On April 12, Southern fire-eaters threw down the gantlet of war by attacking Fort Sumter. Three days later, President Lincoln answered by calling for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the rebellion. Of these dark, grave events, Charles writes:

“Life seemed then full of hope, ambition, budding promise and peace. Suddenly, a call of arms was sounded! There are war clouds, heavy and portentous; the country menaced from within, loyal sons are needed in her defense.”

Civil War was not the commencement Charles and his classmates hoped for. The springtime of their lives was suddenly interrupted; the fate of the nation, of liberty and justice, hung in precarious balance. All eyes turned to the young men and the young women, then as now, our great hope. That hard question was put to Charles and his classmates.

The answer they gave proved a defining moment. It revealed their civic character and it has ever since defined who we are and what we stand for as a college. The answer they gave, in a word, was patriotism. Love of country—that was the consideration, the influence, the power that induced them to forfeit the springtime of their lives, some of them forever.

Patriotism was the crowning virtue of our civil war generation. I've read their essays, I've read their letters, I've read their speeches. I am heart-struck by the deep and abiding love for country that courses through their writings. It is indeed a beautiful thing. The college president, then Edmund Fairfield, called it “Christian patriotism.” Three features are especially instructive.

First, their patriotism was grounded in their experience living on the frontier. It taught them humility—that low but deep and firm foundation of true patriotism.

Our students didn't come from “money” or privilege. They were “Western boys” and “Western girls.” Most grew up on humble homesteads. They earned their daily bread by the sweat of their brows, as one student put it, “getting down into the black nasty soil, plowing fields, pulling beans, hauling corn, digging potatoes.” That hardscrabble life was strong medicine against the vanities, the superficialities, the false pride that are the bane of humanity. They learned to put their hand to the plow and walk humbly with God. This humility proved fertile soil for the seeds of patriotism to take root.

Patriotism begins at home in the land and in the family where we are born and raised. Love of home is a natural and proper thing. On the homestead that love of home expanded to love of country. Working their own land and enjoying the fruit of their own labor, they toiled not as peasants, not as serfs, not as slaves, but as citizens—freeborn, independent, self-governing, American citizens. This liberty—though it was clothed in poverty and toil and sweat—was an “inestimable blessing.” And it made them love their country—this “sweet land of liberty.”

Second, their patriotism was leavened by the liberal education they received at our college. They learned that to love their country well, they must love it intelligently.

Civil War students went to college for the same reasons you do: to better themselves, to elevate their station, to prepare themselves for careers in law, medicine, business, teaching, ministry, politics, the military. But the ultimate end of their education served civic purposes: to make them citizens worthy of their inheritance of liberty and self-government. Essential to this was the cultivation of intelligent patriotism.

The rallying point of American patriotism is our shared commitment to the truths proclaimed in the Declaration and embodied in the Constitution. To love America intelligently requires “sound learning” so that these truths are rightly understood, properly valued, and faithfully lived.

To this end, our students learned that true patriotism is not small minded or parochial. Because it is attached to universal truths, it requires an enlarged humanity. “The sublimest patriotism,” declared President Fairfield, “is that which rests upon the broad basis of justice and humanity, and overtops all the stunted growths of prejudice and casts.”

Our students also learned that, although the love of country is unconditional, it is not uncritical. The heart of a true patriot is not hardened to divine imperatives of justice. A one student contemplating the blight of slavery asks: “What shall we say of this republic? In the language of Jefferson, ‘I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just.’”

And they learned that true patriotism is not just a decision of the head, a rational assent to self-evident truths. It is a commitment of the heart: an abiding faith in the aspirations of those God-ordained truths; a deep respect for our heritage of Republican self-government; and a profound gratitude for the blessings of liberty that were bought for such a great price.

Such lessons constituted not indoctrination, but a genuine moral education in intelligent patriotism. Its fruit was a zealous but humane love for country, ambitious to serve the common good. President Fairfield captures the spirit:

“Cherish, then, the heritage of glory that has come down to us; cherish intelligence—cherish virtue—cherish liberty.... Long live America! Long live her noble and glorious Institutions of Freedom.”

Third, their patriotism that began on a homestead and that was leavened at the College, was perfected in the crucible of war. It made them fighters—who went out from the College and laid down their lives for their country.

True patriotism manifests in service and sacrifice for the nation's good. From mundane acts of civic participation to “the last full measure of devotion” without such service and sacrifice, there is no patriotism.

In the Civil War, 500 of our students and alumni put their patriotism into action by serving in the Army—all of them volunteers, all of them for the Union. As college men, they could have “pulled wires” to secure plush positions for themselves. But not forgetting the humility they learned on Homestead, they chose to enlist, accepting the place and pay of regular soldiers in the ranks. Myron Baker, one of “our heroic dead,” expresses typical sentiments:

“I am not a soldier for its honors, nor am I here for its profits. But from the first, I felt it to be my duty as one claiming the proud civic boast ‘An American Freeman’ to be here battling for nationality and liberty.”

Once in the ranks, the same leavening influence the College had on them, they, in turn, had on their fellow soldiers. Asher LaFleur, who was wounded at Gettysburg and then again in the Wilderness, describes this leavening influence:

“These college boys of ours with their intelligence, their active brains and patriotic hearts went into that rank and file and became at once the very leaven that permeated and controlled it, and by their example, by their enthusiasm, by their intelligence made that rank and file the most effective army ever given any man to command.”

And when it came to fighting, “How like hell, them college boys did fight!” This compliment from a soldier in the 4<sup>th</sup> Michigan came after fierce fighting on Malvern Hill. Henry McGee describes how our boys performed:

“Each boy [stood] in the front rank...and in that fierce battle storm, where every man to the right of me had been shot.... Then no college boy flinched, and each held his place, full to the front, on that awful death line, fighting until the battle was won. Then was demonstrated in that most trying hour, that the college conscience, the student discipline and patriotic purpose was good for any emergency. Every college boy did his whole duty.”

Of the 500 of our boys who served, 100 made the ultimate sacrifice; another 130 suffered grievous and debilitating wounds—230 casualties, a 45 percent casualty rate. So extraordinary was this service and this sacrifice that a leading newspaper declared that “no college in the country is better represented in the Union Army.... It has sent its young men to the war by the hundreds. They have watered with their blood every battlefield in the Republic.” This was the high watermark of Hillsdale College patriotism—true Christian patriotism perfected.

In my lifetime, this kind of true Christian patriotism has become a rare thing. Indeed, patriotism has become a misunderstood, maligned and discredited virtue. The principle causes of its decline are three.

First, the root experience of home is no longer fertile soil for patriotism for so many Americans. If home is where the heart is, then for millions of Americans, home is an artificial social media “metaverse” that inflames the false pride and prejudices that are stumbling blocks to intelligent and humane patriotism.

Second, higher education is no longer a friend to the republic. In 1853, when the cornerstone was laid for the new college building—where Central Hall is now—President Fairfield, in his dedication address, stated:

“This College is a friend of the Republic, and the Republic should be a friend of the College. Our educational establishments have ever been the faithful allies and firm supporters of all that is ennobling in our free institutions.”

It is no coincidence that the cornerstone was laid on Independence Day. This sentiment was the norm then. That higher education and civic education go together—an idea that until recent decades was taken for granted—has all but vanished, except for a few saving remnants, including our College.

Third, many Americans no longer believe their country is worth fighting for. We've all been inspired by the patriotism of the Ukrainians. A recent poll asked Americans, “What would you do if you were in the same position as Ukrainians are now, stay and fight or leave the country?” 52% of Democrats and 32% of Republicans said that they would leave—they would cut and run. Another poll asked if people are proud to be an American. Just 47% answered “extremely proud,” the lowest in the poll’s history, down from 70% in the last 20 years. And another poll asked, if patriotism was an important value. 80% of those over 55 answered yes, but only 42% of those under 38 answered yes.

We've lost the thread of patriotism, especially among the young. What remains is a politicized remnant that sows not unity, but division and discord. Militant progressives condemn patriotism as a refuge for “deplorables”; fire-eating nationalists wield patriotism as a chauvinist cudgel. We are mired in unrelenting political and cultural warfare—what some have called a “cold Civil War.”

I won't belabor this troublesome state of affairs except to say, that, like your classmates of 1861, the springtime of your lives has fallen on portentous times. The future of our experiment in self-government seems to be in doubt. All eyes turn to you, now as then, our great hope. And that hard question is put to you just as it was to your classmates in 1861. What answer will you give?

In these turbulent times, it is easy to despair of our Republic. But a final lesson in true patriotism is that we should “never despair of the Republic.” This lesson is embodied in the Soldiers’ Monument that commemorates the service and sacrifice of the Civil War student

soldiers. That soldier on top of that monument has stood front and center of our campus since 1895. He is, in the words of Henry Magee, “a fully endowed Professor in the Chair Patriotism.” He was designed to be true to life, to embody the courage and determination and patriotism of those Civil War soldiers. The next time you pass by him, stop, look and take note of the way he stands: straight, tall, chest out, head up, face set like flint—like Jesus set his face when he went on the road to Jerusalem—and he is proudly holding aloft the battle flag.

When I look about you, our senior class, I see that same courageous spirit of patriotism. I see it in you. Your patriotism, like theirs, has been nurtured in good homes. Your patriotism, like theirs, has been properly leavened by your education here. And you, like them, are fighters—prepared to put your patriotism into action in good service to our country.

No, I do not despair of the Republic, I take heart. I take heart knowing that you will go from this College and give a good answer to that hard question. You will prove yourselves the earnest preservers of the liberties of our country in this time of uncivil peace just as your Civil War classmates were its defenders and protectors in war. I am confident of that you will, like them, fight the good fight; you will, like them, continue the race; and you will, like them, keep the faith in the American cause of liberty and self-government.

It's been an honor to be your teacher.

I bid you Godspeed as you graduate from this College and commence your lives as freeborn, independent, self-governing, American citizens.