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*[Editor's Note: The following text is presented here as it was transcribed in the notebook of John Young, Dickinson Class of 1788. All strike-throughs and misspellings have been retained.]*

## Valedictory Address Delivered by Robert Duncan

**September 26, 1787**  
**First Commencement of Dickinson College**

The general expectation of so respectable & learned an audience, the unacquaintance, which he, who now has the honor of addressing you, possesses in exercises of this kind, & the fear, which every man possesses in a new situation, might be productive of great diffidence & apprehension. The consideration of the effect, which the performances of this day may have upon this seminary in its infancy, will add greatly to his embarrassments; yet the candor, which he has experienced on former occasions, has in some degree conquered these scarce apprehensions. The task assigned me is indeed a most disagreeable one, viz. the last solemn adieu to Tutors, whom we have loved & revered, to Fellow-students, with whom we have lived in bonds of the most cordial friendship & amity, is a most painful, & causes sensations, which language cannot express, & which only those in my situation can experience.

A short review of the advantages & benefits, which arise from literature & science, may not at this time appear improper, as it may afford those, who honor us with their preference, a just idea of the importance of a liberal education, & impress my fellow-students with a sense of the obligations, which we owe to those generous men, who founded this institution, & to those worthy masters, who have conducted our studies.

The human soul without education may be well compared to the marble hidden in the quarry, which shews none of its splendor or peculiar properties, until the skilful hand of the statuary polishes & displays its colours, makes its surface smooth, & discloses to view every ornamental cloud, spot, & vein, that runs through the whole body of it. Education, in the same manner, when it works

upon a noble mind, draws out to view every latent virtue & perfection, which without such helps are never able to make their appearance. The figure is in the stone, the sculptor only finds it. What sculpture is to a block of marble, education is to the human soul. The philosopher, the saint, or the hero, the wife, the good, or the great man, very often lie hid & concealed in the plebeian, which a proper education might have disinterred, & have brought to light. How much, therefore, must we be displeas'd in reading the history of any savage nation, to see courage exerting itself in fierceness, resolution in obstinacy, wisdom in cunning, patience in sullenness & despair, & even justice in cruelty?

"Ingenious arts, where they an entrance find.

"Soften the manners, & subdue the mind.

What obligations do we owe to this, Heaven-born science? By thee we are enabled to compare the properties of magnitudes, to fix our Neighbour's land mark, & by this means, prevent many fruitless & litigious suits; to skim along the watry surface of the ocean, on the wings of the wind, secure & safe, & to export the various produce of this highly favored land, & receive in exchange those articles, which may tend to the mutual happiness & emolument of the producer, purchaser & consumer. To thee the merchant is indebted for all his vast acquisitions, & the subtle politician for all the honor of his deep-laid schemes. By thee the statesman is enabled to devise good, wholesome, wise & salutary laws, which tend to promote his own honor, the interest of society, & the general happiness & glory of his country; the ingenious mechanic to construct many useful & wonderful machines, which without thy aid he could never bring to perfection; the skillful Anatomist to dissect & explain the various combinations of this wonderful fabric, the body of man; and the venerable pastor is better enabled to unfold the dark & mysterious pages of history, with ease to himself, with perspicuity and delight to his hearers, & with honor to his profession. By thee we are enabled to dive into the secrets of nature, & please ourselves with the wonderful works of God; to show thunder, hail, & the vivid flash of the forked lightning in miniature, to explain their various phænomena, & to prevent their direful effects. By thee we are enabled to account for all the variegated colours of the rainbow both primary & secondary, to explain the amazing velocity of light, & the manner in which images are formed on the retina, the sable colour of the atmosphere, the blue vault at noon, & all those glorious appearances, & rich

colours in the horizon. With thee the mind can soar from earth to heaven, view myriads of suns, multiplied without end, & ranged all around us at immense distances from each other, attended by myriads of worlds, all perhaps inhabited by intelligent creatures, all in rapid motion, yet in the most perfect harmony, all performing their various revolutions in obedience to one supreme governor, & in submission to those laws, which he impressed on them at their formation. Our eyes may hereafter be strong enough to command this magnificent prospect, & our understandings capable of finding out the several uses of those great parts of the Universe. In the mean time, they are very proper objects for our imaginations to contemplate, that we may form more exalted notions of infinite wisdom & power, & learn to think humbly of ourselves & of all the little works of human invention.

It cannot be controverted that all our attainments have, in some degree, multiplied in the two last centuries. Acquisitions & additions to human knowledge have increased & are daily augmenting. The mind had extended its powers, & the physical happiness of man has expanded with his moral felicity. The discoveries, which have been, & are daily made, inspire hopes of approaching the summit of perfection, provided that the philosopher will not relax his exertions. What arts have been invented in this period? What voyages & discoveries have been made; what improvement in navigation, in trade, commerce & legislation? The collected views of these new lights for the human intellect inspire the rational inference, that learning, morality, & consequently happiness, will one day obtain universal dominion through all regions of the earth. A multitude of inestimable treasures, unknown in former times, have opened in the world for its exceptance. In consequence of literature & civilization, the industry of posed productions long concealed in her capacious womb. A thousand momentous satisfactions, producing the most pleasing & agreeable sensations, have been submitted to our acceptance in the ingenuity of modern discoveries. Even our pleasures have been infinitely diversified. Wares, merchandize & a thousand commercial means & utensils have been multiplied. New gratifications to our task & genius have been invented, & the road to science has been facilitated & abridged; while the thorny walks of life have been strewed with flowers. If even these blessings are not, like the rays of the sun, or the rain of heaven, distributed in equal portions among the children of men; yet this very inequality forms a new bond of love to connect mankind by the indispensable duties of ~~religion~~ humanity, order & justice. A reciprocal dependence arises from this variety of our condition; for the opulent

are supported & supplied by the laborer & the artist, while they interchangeably receive the value of their time from the treasures of the rich. But it is from the improvement in moral philosophy we derive the greatest advantage. 'Tis thine, Philosophy, to quicken the taste for the beauties of creation, & to render it not only pleasing to the imagination, but also to the understanding. Philosophy does not confine itself to the tinkling murmur of brooks, the cooling shades of groves & woods, nor the beautiful appearance of fields and meadows in bloom. It has a much more noble object in view. It considers the ends of providence, which are served by them, & the wonders & goodness of divine wisdom & power, which appear in them. It heightens the pleasures of the eye, & raises such a rational admiration in the soul of man, as is little inferior to devotion. 'Tis thou, Philosophy, that calmest the troubled breast, & makest the mind serene. 'Tis thou, who banishest all care & discontent. 'Tis thou, who art capable to rouse & to soothe the ruffled passions, & keep the soul in perpetual calm. The darkness & the ignorance, which have enveloped the face of the earth, are either totally dissipated, or vanish rapidly through the daily progression of time. An intellectual illumination, & the knowledge we have acquired of our rights as men, keep an equal place with the illustration of our moral duties. Philosophy has seated reason on her throne, & extended the limits of her power. She has removed the influence of prepossession & prejudice, & broke the yoke of superstition. The sovereign power of Princes is defined & understood, & bounds are prescribed to civil & religious authority. She has vindicated the rights of liberty, which should never be controuled or invaded. By her exertions the science of government is better understood; for wise & salutary laws have taken place of odious prescripts & barbarous customs. Maxims familiar to our conceptions, & directly pointing to our felicity, & subservient to all the of society & intercourse, have been established on such a basis as can never be subverted by tyranny & domination. Even wars are less frequent, & they are not accompanied with that inhumanity recorded of ancient days. The interruption of peace is not now of trivial consideration, & under the guidance of literature & philosophy, its duration is not impeded by rash, unexpected & savage incursions. A thousand absurdities have been suppressed, & she has introduced humanity & politeness, & diffused their impressions upon every order & distinction of men among civilized nations; in a word, she has cleared, fertilized & improved the soil, from which we are to collect the happiness of society, & we can at length pronounce, "Philosophical truth has vanquished, & the preservation of man & the improvement of his condition is the result of its victory." To an intelligent mind accustomed to regard the cause, progress &

effects of human events, what an object for reflexion does the comparison of the state of the old World with its present situation afford? That extensive continent before the introduction of learning was a poor & rude country, inhabited only by tyrants & slaves, & exhibited a picture of most melancholy barbarity. Literature, Science & Taste were words scarce known in those dark ages; the human mind was neglected, uncultivated, depressed & sunk in the most profound ignorance. But now she has become the seat of liberty, industry & civilization, renowned for the wisdom of her laws & political constitution, & no less famous for her literature & refined philosophy. There the human mind has made the greatest improvement, & there the sciences, the useful & ornamental arts, have attained their greatest height & perfection. But when such a mind takes a view of this new world, it will be filled with astonishment & admiration. The discovery of America was an object beyond the reach of human conception, & when discovered, it was a dreary wilderness, occupied by some wandering tribes of savages, sunk in the lowest ignorance, most horrid barbarity & blind superstition. Nought to please the eye;..... "all a barren waste. Nought to gratify the ear;.....silence all around, except the sounds of the prowling beasts of prey, the dismal shrieks of a tortured captive, or the more dismal yells of his captor rejoicing in his pangs. How different is the present prospect? Spacious & elegant cities; neat villages & improved farms; churches dedicated to the true God, & the religion of Christ, of benevolence & mercy, is at least professed every where among us. Temples of Science here & there catch the eye & delight the soul, & the ear is regaled with the delightful sound of music & din of industry. What continent or country is destined to bear the glorious appellation of the kingdom of morals, governed by virtue & simplicity; what generation will commence the reign of reason, religion & justice, is yet concealed from human sagacity. May we indulge the fond idea, that this heavenly sway of morals is reserved for the sons of this new world? We have before us the history of our species on the stage of the old one, for near five thousand years, & God knows, it can do little more than extract tears of blood from the heart of sensibility, & reprobation of almost every page of it from the judgment of reflexion. The great & good should make the empire of morality the subject of all their meditations & fond wishes. The rapine & injustice committed, torrents of blood & desolation sweeping away whole nations, in Asia, Africa, & Europe, in the tide of past ages, furnish monitory instructions to our American legislators to oppose the mounds of law & justice to the practice or admission of such diabolical crimes & devastation into this new hemisphere.

Thus far, my Friends, have I mentioned some of the many happy advantages to be derived from a liberal education, & attempted to shew what a powerful influence it has upon the manners, improvement & happiness of a people, & likewise how requisite it is for qualifying every man for becoming useful to the society in which he is placed. But in what manner shall we now return our grateful acknowledgements to those generous few, who have qualified us for appearing in the literary world, & through whom we have received so many useful instructions? And first let us pay our tribute of thanks to you, ye venerable Trustees, to whose disinterested & unwearied exertions we owe so much, who, nobly instigated by a love of mankind, & a zeal of diffusing knowledge, have founded this seminary in this western world. Or how shall we express the sentiments of esteem, gratitude & veneration, which we all feel, & which no distance of time, no situation in life, can ever efface? My abilities are unequal to the task. It would be ingratitude to pass over in silence that virtuous Citizen, whose name our College bears, whose generous soul first planned, & whose munificent hand first gave support to this institution. The time, I hope, is not far distant, when Dickinson College will be as celebrated as any of the Colleges in the eastern world, if it is only encouraged & frequented more than it has been hitherto. Then, most venerable Sirs, shall ye fully reap all the advantages of your unwearied assiduity. Then shall her sons reflect honor on her worthy founders by a conduct distinguished for virtue & morality, & a taste for literature & religion.

Here let me take a last & affectionate view of the learned & faithful directors of our studies, of those under whose guide we have trod the flowery paths of literature, & have devoted themselves to the improvement of our minds. With what grateful hearts should be affected towards those, who with unwearied & faithful assiduity have instilled into us the principles of learning, of philosophy & of virtue;.....you whose wise instructions are happily calculated to form & enlighten the infant mind upon its first opening, & prepare it to receive the early impression of literature & morality.

"Delightful talk! To rear the tender thought,  
 "To teach the young idea how to shoot,  
 "To breathe the enliv'ning spirit, & to fix  
 "The generous purpose in the glowing breast.

To make distinctions might, perhaps, seem invidious. Gratitude compels us to mention that worthy man, who presides over this seminary, whose expanded mind, despising the illiberal prejudices of his country, urged by a desire of becoming useful to this new world, in the vale of years, abandoned his native land, respectable connexions, beloved friends & an honorable station in life, risked himself, his amiable family, his All, to a tempestuous sea, & transported them to a country to him unknown, but who were not strangers to his merit & eminent abilities;.....a country, whose cause, in the midst of her most implacable enemies, & in the days of her blackest adversity, he espoused. All this hath been done for our welfare; all to enlighten us with true knowledge, to adorn & enrich our minds with excellent sentiments of virtue & morality; advantages that can never be repaid. Surely then, my fellow-Students, our bosoms should teem with the most ardent gratitude. Yes, reverend Sir, we owe you much. A sufficient tribute of thanks we cannot pay. Here, then, let me present the unfeigned acknowledgements of my fellow Graduates, for all your past services & unbounded wishes for our welfare. Ever dear shall you be in our memory, & when we lose the remembrance of you, may we be despised & forgotten by the World.

But while my eyes direct themselves forwards to you, my Fellow-Students, permit me to address a few words to you, as the last bequest of a friend, who will ever delight in the connexion here formed, & who feels himself deeply interested in the happiness of each. At your age, the love of pleasure is extremely natural, & the enjoyment, perhaps, in some degree not unbecoming; but young minds too frequently mistake the object, & generally set out wrong in the pursuit. Enjoy pleasures, but let them be rational, genuine, & properly your own. Trust to nature, application & perseverance in your studies for more sublime ones than you are yet acquainted with. The student, who performs with cheerfulness & accuracy the tasks that are prescribed to him by his masters, feels more solid content & pleasure, than he, who squanders away his time in vicious company, & in the frivolous amusements of the town. The youth, that is afraid to labor, will never be a man of true spirit. Cultivate your faculties with care & diligence. Store your memories with useful facts, maxims, examples & arguments. Frequently compare your ideas, & review the progress you have made in science. Dream not of being able to make those comprehend what you have learned, who are destitute of taste, & unacquainted with the elements of science. Beware of pedantry & vanity, as well as of ignorance. Modesty is the varnish of knowledge, & the ornament of youth. Be not uneasy what the ignorant think of you, while

you give them no cause of displeasure. Let there reign amongst you an esteem & veneration for your masters, & love & benevolence to each other. Let there be an universal emulation to acquire learning & knowledge. Let the love of learning be your predominant passion. Apply yourselves to the knowledge of men & things; this will enable you to fill the most distinguished stations & places in public life; this is the ardent & sincere wish of us, who this day leave you in the pursuit of those objects. A solicitude for your interest & happiness, the recollection of the many kind offices I have experienced from you, prompted me to give you this last advice. And when memory places before me the many happy scenes we have passed together in social affection, & the bitter moment of separation, that is now to take place, my mind is filled with the most poignant regret.

But there remains to me still a severe trial of sorrow & distress. Indulge, my gentle auditors, the falling tear. It is a tribute due to such a separation. The last farewell to that band of Brothers, who have this day with me performed their last Academic exercises, to dissolve the near connexion we have here formed, to renounce the society of friends so deservedly dear, is surely bitter enough. But the separation is not a final one. We shall again meet in the busy scenes of life, as Brethren, as friends, as Children of the same Alma Mater. The friendship here formed will be there renewed, "grow with our growth, & strengthen with our strength." We have different pursuits & prospects in life & must be placed in different situations. The eyes of mankind will naturally be upon us, as the first Graduates of Dickinson College. Let it then, my dear Companions, my beloved friends, be emulation to excell in whatever profession we follow, or in whatever business we may engage, to become good members of society, to be an honor to our worthy instructors & of use to our country. Let our conduct be such as will afford joy to our friends; let it be such as will convince the world that Dickinson College is not degraded by her sons. To fear God is the beginning of wisdom. With reverence, then, my Companions, let us practise that duty, which is at once so strenuously & so awfully enjoined on us. We will thus the more accurately conform to his pleasure, whose favor is better than life, whose smile is heaven, whose anger is hell & its duration eternity. Let the words of adoration & prayer be the guidance & conclusion of all our researches; they are clear as they are comprehensive.

"O thou, whose power o'er moving worlds presides,  
 "Whose voice created, & whose wisdom guides,

"On darkling man, in peace, effulgence shine,  
"And cheer the clouded mind with light divine;

"Tis thine alone to calm the pious breast,  
"With silent confidence & holy rest;  
"From thee, great God, we spring, to thee we tend,  
"Path, motive, guide, original & end.