

Henry Merritt Wriston on the Value of Education,

President of Brown University

From speeches given in the 1940's through 1955

From a recording c 1955 marking his retirement as President:

"There can be only one justification for the existence of this university – here you make the acquaintance and enjoy the hospitality of ideas.

"This treasure-house of ideas -- some of which are very old -- have been tested and tried and not found wanting. These are the seasoned veterans in the war against folly.

"You will master the art of learning. You will be exposed to the philosophers of the world to identify the great problems of the world and what is worthwhile in the life of mankind. You will learn that you cannot discern what is "truth," unless you understand its relationship to beauty.

"But your education is wasted if you do not develop morally. If you do not acquire the moral courage to take some position and stand on it – to call what is right and wrong and take the consequences. ... It is a manifestation of maturity of character to face with steadfastness and with courage the hazards which are part of life itself.

"Most of the voices we hear today are the voices of arrogance spoken by bullies. A man's virtue lies in having intellect and brains. Yet today it seems all the enthusiastic ones have no brains, and all the brains have no enthusiasm. -- The world is dying of hot heads and cold feet."

While the battle for primacy between the spirit of freedom and heroic materialism had been a standoff prior to the war, the glory of righteousness now prevailed over its arch-nemesis (from the speech given to the Graduating Class at Brown University in 1944 in the middle of WWII – my father was in attendance):

"The decision is inexorably being made; however slowly, however haltingly. Its achievement is much more than a mark of intelligence; it is a triumph of character.

"It means that-sacrifice is to take the place of plenty; hardship is chosen over comfort; the things of the spirit are preferred over the pleasures of the moment. It demonstrates that not the short run alone, but the long run, have meaning for the American people. They have not lost their sensitiveness to concepts of right and justice and human dignity. I had rather wait for the assertion of those great qualities of character than see some impulsive and facile but deceptive unity sweep us into action from which we would later retreat;"

"The greatest gift of this University is ... its accent upon values. Standards of value can range from the lowest to the highest. At the bottom is that complete negation of significance epitomized in the well-known phrases, "Let us eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die". "By mere chance were we born, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been; .because the breath' in our nostrils is smoke, and while our heart beateth, reason is a spark, which being extinguished, the body shall be turned into ashes, and the spirit shall be dispersed as thin air."

“The postulate upon which this University stands is at the opposite extreme. The college would never have been founded, it would never have survived, it would never have grown and prospered, without the sense of value epitomized in the motto upon our seal: "In 'Deo Speramus." [In God We Hope/Trust]. It is a measure of value which puts all the intangibles at the head of the list -- human dignity...

“From that central postulate flows the demand for freedom, for justice, for truth. If that scale of values is valid, then other things may have to be sacrificed to maintain them. The physical standard of living, the ease and comfort, the pleasures may have to be sacrificed for a time in order that things of more exalted value may be preserved.

“Your predecessors [from the American Revolution] had no wish ...to give up their studies, their comforts, such fortunes as they had... in the War for Independence. But their studies would have been useless if they had not led them to express their mature characters in action which vindicated the values educated men have always held most precious.... Then students of Brown turned from books to guns with the same reluctance as you do today, and only when it seemed necessary to vindicate in action the fundamental values for which the University itself stood....

“It is not an intellectual game. It is not even a cold calculation of national self-interest upon a material plane. What we now witness is the essential character of the American people manifesting itself in a determination to vindicate those values which are most precious”

Wriston clearly understood the University should have a "soul" which aimed at Lifting the Dignity of the Human Spirit for the purpose of building a stronger foundation for civilization itself.
