

The High School Graduate's Place In The World Today
by Josephine Feldmark

Tonight, as the class of 27-42, we reach the climax of twelve years of school life — the period during which we have grown from childhood through adolescence into the almost-complete maturity of manhood and womanhood. Now as we look backwards we see that the twelve years have rolled relentlessly by, that it seems only yesterday that the thousand interlocking events and new learnings passed us in rapid succession, and now we are about to take our places along with other high-school graduates of the nation as the new American youth.

We are particularly fortunate when compared to the graduating classes before us — we leave school at a time when employment is to be found in abundance, when the country is at a high level of development — industrial, physical, cultural, and spiritual — and when both the nation and the world in general have learned that special attention must be given to youth — its training and ideas. It was not so long ago that persons just out of school were obliged to accustom themselves to the world routine, to take for granted the procedures and custom of their communities whose functionings had been planned long before by more experienced minds. Despite the fact that these ideas, although perhaps invaluable when first applied, gradually became “stale” and out-of-place with the changing times, the youth was expected to “fall into the run of things” and accustom itself to patterns of living and thinking that had been ideal for its grandfathers. Any who sought to break away from general thought and procedure were dubbed more or less as “revolutionaries”. Yet it is thanks to these so-called “revolutionaries” that our world has advanced. Gradually as people became more educated, liberal, and progressive, a growing need to hear and help encourage the ideas of youth was realized. This is especially true in our own country. It should also be understood that youth in other nations — Germany, Russia, China, Latin America — is being given special attention also, but attention of a different type.

It is here in America especially, in this land of prairie and civilization that the youth is permitted to develop naturally with guidance rather than by control. And for this reason the high school graduate of America more than anywhere else may hope to realize his ambitions and fulfillments of responsibility, not as a dream of a distant future, but as something he may hope to see and experience himself.

I have mentioned before that we are going out into the world in a time of our nation's prosperity and plenty. Yet there is a dim presentiment, a dark foreboding of the future that is personified in the gloom and misery of war-torn Europe and Asia. They may never reach us directly — the bombs and death-cries and smoking ruins of empires and republics whose glorious cultures are now only shadows of yesterday

— but they nevertheless embody for us a vast new duty that we should be proud to accept. The art and sculpture of Ancient Greece, the gaiety and personality of Paris, the serenity and content of bright Holland tulip-gardens, the song and color of old Spain, the gondola-music and historic significance of sunny Italy and Vienna, the great science and literature of Germany — where are they all today? If they are ever to be restored after Europe is cleared of war-clouds, it is up to the youth of those nations, the new and coming generations. For the future of a country depends on its youth, and we of America, although safe and free, have nevertheless responsibilities whose significance has increased and whose call to action will continue to gain in momentum and seriousness as the years go by. Because we will be less preoccupied in the immediate future with employment problems, we may begin at once to fulfill the responsibilities that our nation's heritage and conditions abroad have placed on our shoulders.

It is up to us to make our country even finer and stronger than it is today — to make it a stauncher refuge and symbol of democracy that will still more encourage the hungry hearts and souls overseas. We must improve its culture, its art and science and songs and poetry to make its soul and what it stands for unconquerable and great. We must raise the spirit of its people — eliminate completely the prejudices against races, religions, and new ideas, remembering that regardless of his color or beliefs or philosophies, a man is still a human being and is entitled to be treated as such. We must learn to regard our fellow-men as brothers — American, European, Asiatic, African, Australian — we must forget the false conception that some races are superior to others. For there is not one, given opportunity, patience, and time, that will not produce greatness in some field or other.

There are spiritual and idealistic frontiers in our nation yet to be discovered and overcome in search of new and even greater ones — the vast possibilities in science and invention and medicine, the development of learning and strong philosophies in our people (many of whom are still illiterate), the building of even greater centers of civilization in the midst of blue prairie-lands and purple canyons, the improvement of living-conditions and security among our large population — these are but a few hopes and not-impossible dreams beckoning from the future.

And there is nothing new about them — nothing we have not heard before. They were embodied in the prayers and expectations of the pilgrim-fathers, in the ideals of 1776, in the blood and bitterness of Civil War days, and in the constant turmoil and progress of our youthful nation.

She is young, and they chuckle abroad because we constantly stress the point — but they believe in her nevertheless, and the astonishment they once experienced as she grew in learning and importance has now resolved itself into trust and expectation of an even greater future.

America now stands alone as the greatest of the free. She has her Indian origin, her fascinating rugged and contradictory growth, and the best of a little bit of every nation in the influence of her development and as part of her people. She has gone far since she first rose out of the blue Atlantic to gladden the eyes of Columbus many centuries ago — but it is as nothing when compared to the path of her future, disappearing into the distance of coming years. And she now looks to us, the graduating class of 27-42 as part of her new youth, to take our places with the rest of her people and help lead her through the pain and struggle of change and development into the climes of strength and understanding joy and song that cannot fail to come. We know, as we enter the world of mature responsibility tonight, that we shall not disappoint the trust she has placed in us.