

# GRADUATION: AN END OR A BEGINNING

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Where does the time go? It changes so rapidly. Events which occur in time also change rapidly. This is especially true in terms of what kinds of things happen from one generation to another. How often have you uttered or heard someone else utter: "How the time flies." We always wonder whatever happened to it.

Time is mercurial. We cannot grab hold of it and keep it in place. Try as we might, it always seems to get away from us. We do, however, have some choices in regards to it. We can either watch it as it hurries on leaving us far in the distance or we can try to keep up with it. It is most difficult to accomplish the latter.

Whenever we are only able to react to time, time has eluded or left us behind again.

How do we deal with it? How do we keep from falling victim to time? We must anticipate it. We must plan for it. We must, in short, be prepared for it before it happens.

You want to hear a little story? Ok. Its a true story and it concerns us — all of us. It concerns us no matter who we are or where we come from. It is a story which is thousands of years old and it is only a day old. Why, it is even a story which is unfolding even now as we do whatever we're doing. It is the story of mankind.

For the most part, it has followed the description and formula

set forth by the noted English historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee. A story of "Challenge and Response." According to Toynbee, mankind, down through the ages, has consistently been faced with numberless challenges. Attempts to formulate the proper responses to those challenges have sometimes missed the mark. Other times they have been close enough but not in the "bullseye." In those former instances, when the responses have not been proper, entire civilizations have fallen. In the latter case we have triumphed but not without a cost factor. People and town have been destroyed before a solution could be garnered.

We have glorified in those victories. Celebrations, parades, fireworks and such have borne testimony to the victories. But what of

those destroyed? Their bodies lie rotting in millions of graves the world over. The towns lie in rubble and ruin and are visited by tourists with their guides who identify those points of interest: "Over there is where



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Hector, the hero of the Trojans, was dragged around the city of Troy tied to the chariot of Achilles," or "We are standing on the Plains of Abraham where the forces of Hannibal were

defeated by those of Scipio Africanus before he sent his troops to lay waste to the city of Carthage," or "Here is the beginning of the Cherokee Trail of Tears," or "This is where slaves were auctioned in

Charleston," or "This is where the Bataan Death March occurred," or "This is Hiroshima." The list could go on and on and on.

Sure, responses were generated but not before massive sufferings had taken place. Part of the answer is fairly easy. We have not yet fully learned to benefit from the lessons of the past. Since we have not done so, we are yet doomed to repeating the errors of the past. Too many of us have been primarily concerned with the present — little knowledge of the past and little thought of the future. There have been some who were dif-

ferent but they have historically been described as "being ahead of their time." Silly. No one is ahead of time. We are, as Dr. Benjamin Mays said of Martin Luther King on the occasion of delivering the latter's eulogy, "within our own time."

Time. How do we handle it? I like what William Ernest Henley wrote in his poem *Invictus*. Listen:

*Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul  
In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed  
Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.  
It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.*

Henley, in his last stanza, takes responsibility for himself when he writes: "I am the master of my fate." Fate — what happens to or with us. Fate — that which we should be masters of. Fate — off into the future. Fate — that which, when we are aware of it, makes us plan for the future. Fate — time — preparation for the future. That is how we master time.

So here we are at this point in time and we have ambivalent feelings. We're happy and sad. No more school, no more homework, no more tests, no more... anything. Someone once said that "a little learning is a dangerous thing." I believe that. I also believe that one can never learn enough nor does one ever finish learning. As we all know, one does not necessarily have to be in a classroom in order to learn. Our senses, all of them, are constantly feeding us data. We see, we hear, we smell, we feel and we taste. We are walking, in most cases, computers and we must, from time to time, analyze our print-outs and reflect on them.

Some of you will go on to college, some to trade school, some directly to the job market and some will neither go to school or to work — for a while — because there is either no money for college or no jobs to be had. You don't need me to tell you that things are tough. You don't need me to tell you what the unemployment rate among young people is today. You don't need me to tell you any of those things, but I do. I do so not to alarm you but to encourage you.

Remember that story of mankind that I started telling you some minutes ago? Here's another chapter. One hundred and seventeen years ago, in the spring of the year 1865, schools were opened for your ancestors. Schools where your great grandparents sat upon crude wooden benches and ran their gnarled fin-

gers around the edge of tattered books for the first time in their lives.

For most of the years of their lives, most had been slaves. Not many could read or write. When the Freedman's Bureau opened those schools, they sat there and listened intently. They listened because they knew it was important to learn to read and write. There were no long lines of employers waiting to offer them professional positions. Actually, there were few jobs at all. Even though they had worked all of their lives, they had not been paid. You see, as effect, we become the masters of our fate. pay them there were plenty of jobs. Once a salary was necessary, all of a sudden, black people no longer knew how to do anything. Can you believe that?

All of their lives they had worked — sunrise to sunset — and didn't

have a penny to show for it. Yet they listened. Yet they wanted to learn. Yet they made the big effort. Why? They were planning for the future. They were seeking to control time. Before, they had had neither control over their future nor their time. They could only react to the whims of

others. They were determined to put an end to that.

Few, if any, read the Great Books of the Western World. They could sign their names and "figger." The next generation, your great grandparents learned more and their futures were just as chancy as their parents' had been. Already labor unions were excluding them. Already they had to work as scabs at low rates of pay whenever the union workers went out on strike. Already they were being relegated to the very worst of jobs at the very lowest salaries. They did not despair. They went on.

Your grandparents, some of them, might have gotten as far as the fifth or sixth grades. They were forced to work as domestics, ostensibly because they did not have more education. We know that that was not the reason. They insisted that your parents go even farther than they had in the schools and most did. Now, here you are. Graduates. How many of your friends, your ages, had to, for whatever reasons, drop out of school? How many times did you consider

that as a possibility? I'm glad that you "hung in there." You're glad, too.

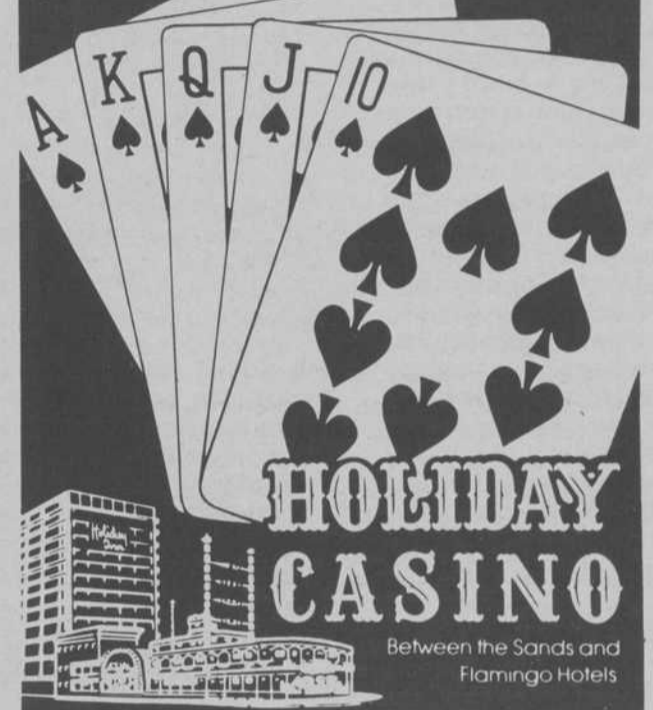
Each generation, since the end of slavery, more and more black people have attended and/or graduated from school. This year's graduates extend that tradition. The "Talented Tenth" of W.E.B. DuBois increases. Soon....

By graduating, we not only prepare for the future but we also affect what that future will be. We anticipate time and reduce our chances of being victimized by it. In Effect, we become the masters of our fate. Soon....

Your generation will witness a new century. Your generation is the future. Your generation will seize the time and define it as it sees fit and whenever anyone asks of you: "Where does the time go?" You will answer: "Wherever I want it to."

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