

Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century commencement oration

Handwritten manuscript on 8" x 5" pages, unsigned and undated

In 2019, this item was found within a box of books, cartes-de-visite, sheet music, and miscellaneous items that Jim Stepleton had inherited from his grandmother, Belle Stepleton, in the mid-1970s. Almost all the materials seemed to have originated with the Stow family.

The following notes are merely preliminary observations, and not entirely reliable ones:

- 1) Internal evidence suggests that the address must have been composed after 1838, the year in which H. W. Longfellow's "The Psalm of Life" was published. (see p. 2)
- 2) It was written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (see p. 9)
- 3) The script, the paper, and the sentiments expressed are all consistent with a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century origin.
- 4) I suspect that it was written prior to the Civil War. I doubt that a student in the 1860s could have avoided mentioning that event or its aftermath, however glancingly.
- 5) The complete absence of topical references, the litany of maxims, the Biblical and classical allusions, and the wandering nature of the text are entirely consistent with the style of the 1850s student essays that I've read (those from the Stow Archive). One may safely conclude that the writer is reflecting the instructions of his or her teachers, and the expectations of his or her audience.
- 6) The text ends rather abruptly. Whether the underlined sentence on page 10 was intended to serve as a conclusion to the essay is difficult to say.
- 7) It should be noted that in this era every graduating student was expected to give an address: this was not an honor accorded only to the most accomplished scholar.
- 8) To me, the handwriting does not seem to match that of Hiram, Loring, Baron, or Julia Stow. It does resemble Viola Stow's hand, but a conclusive determination should be made by someone more knowledgeable than myself. If the document indeed represents Viola's work, then most likely this is the address she would have prepared for the Elizabethtown Female Seminary graduation exercises in June 1859.

-Ellen Stepleton, January 2020



## 1.

Into the Battle of Life we are soon to march; to fill our places, to fight for good or evil, to win success or meet with failure.

Now comes the time when friends must say goodbye, when ties which have lasted warm and true through happy years must be sundered, never to be again the same.

Soon we will have changed the narrow arena (rostrum, platform) of our Alma Mater for the broad arena of the world, there to work and strive.

Success awaits all those who enter the fray with brave hearts and an unwavering purpose, all those who during their school days have practiced earnestness, perseverance, and

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patience until they have become integral principles of their lives.

We must remember that for victory to be ours, we must labor earnestly and steadfastly. Our armor buckled on, we cannot lay it down until the battle is over, and our hands are folded over our quiet hearts.

The illusions of youth will fade, and we will realize that life has something for us, real and earnest.

These changes will awaken us to the sterner realities of life, for life is "too real, too earnest" not to be usefully filled up.

(Now) We lie moored in the great sea of action, and we have only to seize the oars with one intense purpose, to direct our boat toward the desired port, and if

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we faint not, the e'en will bring us there.

Our object now is to make our work a success. Having our way mapped out as far as it is in human power so to do, it is necessary, if we would be victors in this tournament of life, to keep our eye firmly fixed on the obj. for which we labor.

Many today are making the same mistake at the commencement of their career that Joseph made at the commencement of his. They see the elevations to which they hope to rise, but they see not the disciplinary experience which must precede it. Joseph saw no weary days of slavery and toil. He dreamed of a throne, but he dreamed not that the path to that throne must be through a prison. We may look with raptured eye on the mountains crowned with glory lying yonder in the future, but we must not forget the valley which lies between. Men speak of Genius & they mean by that an undefined something that will sweep one on toward greatness while he slumbers on a bed of roses. There is no genius that does not include the genius of energy.

## 4.

There is no great achievement that is not the result of working and waiting; no royal road to anything. One thing at a time, all things in succession. That which grows fast, withers rapidly. That which grows slowly, endures. The silver-leafed poplar grows in one decade and dies in the next. The oak takes its century to grow in, and lives and dies at leisure.

We are born to labor, and the world is our vineyard. The field is thronged with the great mass of humanity. Many are pressing forward, reaping abundant harvests as their



reward. Work is the law of life. The planets, never pausing in the mighty sweep of their majestic career march,

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the sparkling stars, never ceasing to show forth the handiwork of him who bade them shine, all bear testimony to nature's universal law of labor. Many have noble aims and purposes in life, but wait for a tomorrow to perform their work. This is one cause of so many failures. Yet many of the failures and defeats in this great battle are but seemingly such, for from many of the darkest days in history, choicest results have followed. It was a dark day when the puritans, finding no rest for the soles of their weary feet, sailed from the Old World. But out of it came America.

It was a dark day when the persecutions that rose about Stephen dismayed the disciples. But out of it came the worldwide

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preaching of the Gospel.

Darkest of all days was that on which the sun hid its face, when the Divine man was expiring on Calvary. After thirty toilsome unrewarded years in the shop of the village carpenter, One came forth to be preeminently the man of sorrow, to wander from city to city, and to expire in lonely agony on the shameful cross. Was this a failure? All our hopes and all our happiness come from that day.

Changes have been going on through all the ages of the past, and often we find the things of yesterday are not, or do not, exist today. A nation is born, as it were, in a day; it develops rapidly; reaches its climax; then begins its fall, and soon

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the last chapter in its history is recorded, and it is remembered with the things that have been.

So it is with man: honors may crowd thickly around him, yet before his work is completed, he may be removed from his sphere of action. For each day from [the] summer fields of life some harvester disappears; every hour some sentinel falls from his post and is thrown from the ramparts of time.

What an army of soldiers stands ready for the battle! Their pursuits are different, but by striving and being patient they will win success. They should work and wait, for this world had to go through convulsions and changes before so simple a thing as a flower could grow.

By perseverance all the successes in the world have been

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accomplished. The failures we meet with will be as lessons and warnings in our future activities. Few however learn the lesson nature teaches: to bow before the storm, only to rise higher and grow stronger. Many a tree which stands proudly erect braving the storm is hopelessly broken, while the bowing willow or bending sapling yields to every blast only to rise higher when the storm has abated. Like the self-sustained trees, we too often in our strength -strength which is all weakness- defy the threatening clouds, determined to fight it out alone, and so defeat the aim intended by the [illegible]. The ancients engraved on the walls of the temple at Delphi the words "Know thyself." By knowing ourselves, and with an



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honorable purpose standing clearly defined against Life's horizon, we, strong in the consciousness of right, may aspire to any height and reach it. (to be inserted before the ancients &. With persistent hands, a firm steady purpose will bring one forward to the goal for which he strives.)

The humblest life in this 19<sup>th</sup> century will may have the same advantages as the fishermen of Galilee. Though they enjoyed the verbal teachings of the holy Carpenter of Nazareth, his messages have rung down the ages and are as potent today as in those far off years when he taught beneath Judea's stately palms.

The golden key which opens the door to all success is energy. Without it, we cannot enter the halls of learning and [illegible]. Without it, the temple of science is ever closed to us.

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Without its magic power, the beauties and mysteries of nature are forever hidden from our understanding.

It is the motive power, which leads to all greatness.

