

UNTIMELY DEATH

An Oration

by
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From an oration with which the author won first in Iowa State and third in National Collegiate Contests for Women, 1960.

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...For most of us—for me, at least—this is a time for looking ahead. We are wondering what we shall be doing, where we shall be, what we shall be like in ten years, how we shall use our potentials and our education. We are going out into the big wide world; and I do not mind admitting, I am scared! I am apprehensive about a lot of things, but most of all, I am afraid of dying young, of an untimely death. No, I do not mean that kind of death. I am afraid of dying mentally, spiritually, inside before I ever die physically....

Being mentally alive requires that we maintain an active interest in, and concern for, more than the small world of our jobs and our homes; an interest in the things and the people around us, everyone from the guy next door to people starving in India. It means caring—thinking, and reading, and learning, and always growing.

And so, after we have closed our text books and gotten our diplomas, the new facts and snatches of information we have managed to acquire will not be so important. The things that will matter are the habits and attitudes and values which we will take with us into adulthood.

Not too long ago, I went out and knocked on some people's doors. I wanted to find out what people do with their leisure time. So I asked the person who answered:

Do you enjoy reading? Most said they did.

Have you been reading a book lately, say since the beginning of the year? No, not one of them had.

Do you read the newspapers? Yes, when I have time.

Do you read the editorial page? No, not really.

What do you usually do in your free time? Most of the people said they watch television, so I asked what was their favorite program. And the usual answer was, "It doesn't really matter—whatever happens to be on. After you come home from a long day of work, it is nice to put up your feet and just be entertained." On the way home I stopped at the library to find out how many people have library cards. In that town of nearly eight thousand, only fourteen hundred take out books. This is by no means a "scientific sampling." But there was a Gallup Poll conducted about four years ago which reported these results:

Although the United States has the highest level of formal education in the world, fewer people here read books than in any other major democracy. Fewer than one adult in every five was found to be reading a book at the time of the survey.

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