After six years in office, Benno C. Schmidt Jr. announced that he was resigning the presidency. Howard R. Lamar, Sterling Professor of History and former Dean of Yale College, was chosen to serve as Acting President (his title changed to President during the year he served). Lamar had been a member of the faculty for forty-three years, had a Ph.D. in American History from Yale, and was one of the University’s most respected professors. The Baccalaureate Address that he delivered at Commencement in 1993 reveals much about the man and the institution he loved.
Howard R. Lamar
Giving a baccalaureate address is perhaps the most daunting task university presidents face in their careers, for they are supposed to tell the graduating seniors to go out and save the world by living a life of selfless service, by running business and industry honestly and efficiently, and by making large gifts to alumni funds. And now, at Yale at least, we have the additional challenges of having two Yale graduates in the White House as possible role models. Do I now urge you to go out and be at least some kind of president? All I can say is that if I could finally do it at 69, you all have a much better fighting chance whether it be as presidents of political, educational, or business institutions. But even that incentive to ambition is as old as the nation itself. Washington did it with a cherry tree legend, Lincoln by his image as rail-splitter, Jackson by being so tough he was called “Old Hickory.” If trees could help elect those three, think of the opportunities today! In this age of environmental self-consciousness, you might get to the White House via Environmental Studies or the Forestry School.

But all this kidding aside, a baccalaureate address has to be a serious message to those who are about to commence a life in the “real world.” And a random survey of Yale commencement speeches and personal remarks of graduates reconfirms its serious purpose. When Ezra Stiles, for example, graduated from Yale and was named a tutor in the college, he drew up a moral and ethical code of conduct that he could follow when placed in, as he put it, “an honorable theatre of action.” It read as follows:

1. In every action and station of life, act with judgment, calmness, and good humor of mind.

2. Endeavor to make the business of your life your pleasure, as well as your employment. Labor ipse voluptas.

3. Be contented with whatever condition and circumstances Providence shall allot you in the world; and therein endeavor, some way or other, to be useful to your fellow-men.

4. Persuade yourself that to live according to the dictates of Reason and Religion is the finest, and indeed the only way to live happily in the world, and to lay the foundation of happiness in the other.

5. Extirpate all vicious inclinations; cultivate and improve the mind with useful knowledge, and inure it to virtuous habits; think, live, and act rationally here, that you may be progressively preparing for heaven. Nulla dies sine linea.
In 1921, nearly a hundred and fifty years later, President James Rowland Angell was more concerned with process: that is, how can universities educate men and women to be both respectful of the past and hopeful for the future. As he observed:

“Today as always after a period of upheaval in men’s methods of thought and conduct, World War I, the university has as its most compelling problem the preservation of those elements in the old whose value has been proved while seeking out and testing that which is significant in the new. Respectful of the great traditions of the past, we must nevertheless recognize the peculiar exigencies of the present, and the radiant promise of the future. The university is essentially a living thing. Like other organisms, it must grow by casting off that which is no longer of value and by taking on that which is… Somewhere between motionless stagnation and incessant flux lies the region of healthful development.”

In his remarks, President Angell spoke of “a radiant future.” But as constant polls in the past presidential elections indicated, Americans do not face the future today with a great deal of hope—indeed, foreboding is often the dominant mood with a flat economy, unemployment, urban problems that lead to anger, frustration, despair and violence, fear for the environment, war and conflict all over the world, worry over health care and AIDS, and self-doubts about ourselves and our proper role as citizens, and concern over gridlock in government. That foreboding was reiterated in the 25th Class Reunion Book for the graduates of 1968, the years when, as Donald Kimelman observed, “A survey at the end of the book [found] the Class of ’68 well-satisfied with career, families and the overall quality of our lives. A stunningly high percentage are either married or remarried. But when we look forward, the unease comes through. We generally don’t think the next generation will be better equipped and educated to handle the nation’s problems. And, by a narrow margin, we disagree with the notion that ‘our world will be a better place for our children.’”

Given these insights, this time must the baccalaureate be a jeremiad instead of a song to hail a bright future? Somehow we have become overwhelmed by the immediacy of the present. And I asked myself, how can a Yale College education help overcome the pessimism the Class of 1968 voiced and move us toward a better world?

And so, as a change in strategy in baccalaureate addresses, I decided to start with what you yourselves felt by asking some fifteen graduating seniors what they thought of their Yale experience and how each expected to use their College education in the real world. In a sense, I asked those students to provide answers similar to young Ezra Stiles’ two centuries ago. I can say
without blushing that the responses I received were not only reassuring, they provided me with the themes of this address and they reflect, I believe, the sentiments of most of you.

As Karen Alexander, an English major, a *Yale Daily News* editor, and a Freshman Counselor, said: “The most important thing you can learn in college is what you are bad at as well as what you are good at. An important thing I have learned is that Yale, in the best sense, is a four-year intellectual shopping period, where I have learned what I like and where I have learned how to make choices and critical decisions. I wish it had been a longer trip.”

Peter Beinart, a History and Political Science major, Freshman Counselor, columnist for the *Yale Herald*, and Rhodes Scholar, said the following: “One thing I have felt since I got here, being around people who have such a variety of interests and who can articulate them so eloquently, is that the process of self-actualization can actually be quite interesting. I have thought a great deal about who I am, what I care about, and what I am not. There are so many talented people here, committed to so many things, that you have to make ever-finer gradations as to what you want to be committed to, as to what you are, what you can become. The one thing I have learned here—something that makes Yale so exciting—is taking joy in other people’s achievements. It is hard in general for all of us to do that. Yale has helped me to recognize that you can enjoy things others can do but you cannot, without envying them.

“Yale has also helped me realize how parochial the environment I come from is—I come from Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yale has introduced me to the United States. I plan to take that awareness with me to Oxford next year, to introduce them to this country as well.”

It is especially nice to have Mr. Beinart reaffirm our long-standing knowledge that Cambridge, Massachusetts, is a parochial environment.

In a similar vein, Scott Baird, Secretary of the Senior Class and a Freshman Counselor, observed: “It would be enjoyable and beneficial, I think, to be in this environment for another two years. One of the things about the future that frightens me is that I may not be able to find this sort of open, engaging, supportive environment out there in the ‘real world.’ But maybe I’ve learned to create such environments for myself as well.”

These themes of self-discovery run throughout the fifteen statements. But there is a futures theme as well. As Julia Gore, an Ethnic Freshman Counselor and Volunteer at Yale-New Haven Hospital, remarked: “Seeing people here actually doing what they had hoped to do is wonderful, and meeting alumni who have done what they have wanted to do, with satisfaction and pleasure, reinforces my sense of possibility for the future for all of us at Yale.”
Similarly, So Young Park, an English major and a poet who will be studying literature at Columbia next year, commented: “During these four years I have become the person I will probably be for the rest of my life. I have learned, importantly, what my potential is, and that in itself is a satisfying accomplishment. My friends and professors have helped me to develop my passion—poetry—and to pursue it with enthusiasm, with genuine openness about its importance in my life, with supportive encouragement. That is something I will always treasure about Yale: intellectual passions are supported and encouraged here without the need to explain them. They are accepted and nurtured, as part of a resonant community filled with intellectual and academic and personal passion. What a remarkable gift.”

The theme of doing something “out there” comes through even more in Milton Hubbard’s observations. “I am sorry that it’s over,” he said, “but I take comfort in the fact that I have learned a great deal here: about myself, about others, and about Electrical Engineering. The Engineering curriculum here is difficult but it is a quality engineering education. I am taking that education next year to work on creating a new information network for scientists at Merck Pharmaceuticals.”

Janie Jaramillo, an English major active in MeCHA and in Mexican-American cultural groups who plans to teach high school in Texas next year, affirmed the same theme: “I came to Yale from Brownsville, a small, very conservative town in southern Texas, and what I found at Yale was a revelation, especially for me as a Chicana. There were so many different kinds of people here, so many different and divergent points of view, such a range of interests and commitments, and experiences. As a result I’ve learned to think in different ways, broader ways, all for the better. I hope to bring at least part of my new and exciting world to my students next year.”

Stephen Ribisi, a Biology major and Freshman Counselor active in Pathways Peer Counseling and in Walden Student-to-Student Counseling, continues that theme: “One thing which has been tremendously important is my work as a peer counselor. It has provided a chance to call on personal reserves, particularly Pathways, which has enabled me to give something back to the Gay and Lesbian community.

“But this is not a perfect place. Yale can be intellectually unforgiving, and socially difficult. Each of us graduating today has felt that and has sometimes wanted not to forgive Yale either. But like all of us here, I find comfort in knowing that the support network here is so good. I will miss it.”

As has always been obvious, students at Yale learn outside the classroom as well as in. As Valerie Williams, a Psychology major and a mainstay of the Afro-American Cultural Center during her entire undergraduate career, observed; “The experience at the Cultural Center has been a large
part of my happiness here, and I can’t say how important I believe all the Centers are—not only for people of color but for the strength and diversity and dynamics of the whole.”

All these may sound like the testimonials that our Dean of Admissions and our fund-raisers and development officers would hope students would make. But self-gratulation is not the point I wish to make or even the theme of self-discovery. The crucial theme running through all the testimonies is the opportunity for freedom of choice and of expression, a theme Carrie Boren told me she believes is the foundation of her own Yale College experience and that of so many of you here this morning.

In the past four years we have had many powerful rebellions in the name of freedom throughout the world—in Russia and Eastern Europe, in changes in South Africa, in the tragic attempt at change in China and elsewhere. But just as often those democratic impulses, with their goal of freedom, have been met by counterrevolution, by political fragmentation, by examples of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia that have horrified the world, by the numbing madness of small war upon the heels of small war that fester across the planet. These events bring home the trenchant adage of Edmund Burke that “All that is necessary for the forces of evil to win in the world is for enough good men to do nothing.” It should be a given as you march onto the “honorable theatre of action” that you be active citizens in the cause of justice and freedom.

I dwell on the topic of freedom in part because we are supposedly celebrating two major anniversaries to honor democracy and therefore freedom this year. According to the classicists, 2,500 years ago this year democracy was born in Athens when the political leader Cleisthenes in 507 or 508 B.C. enacted reforms that allowed for a first democratic government. This is also the 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson’s birth, another proponent of freedom and democracy despite the fundamental contradiction that he owned slaves. Nevertheless Jefferson was eloquent about democracy, writing: “The happiness of governments like ours, wherein the people are truly the mainspring, is that they are never to be despair’d of” (1785). We are still some distance from Jefferson’s ideal democracy, but, like him, we should never stop trying and never give in to despair. The American tradition of freedom of expression, the more recent toleration of diversity, and the right to decide who you are, which some of you say you experienced at Yale, deserve to be carried by you into your careers and into the whole of America.

In 1787 Thomas Jefferson, who was good at giving good advice and knew it, advised his nephew Peter Carr to “Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion…you must lay aside all preju-
dice on both sides, & neither believe nor reject a thing because any other persons, or description of persons, have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable not for the rightness but the uprightness of the decision.” Jefferson ended his Dutch uncle homily to his nephew by saying that if you find yourself in a radical position, stand there and defend it.

I also find in your statements a concern that would please every president and faculty member from Abraham Pierson onward—namely, that of service to society. In the statements of your fifteen classmates I noted that four of you were Freshman Counselors, others were hospital volunteers, four intend to teach or do community work in Israel, Hungary, Korea, or Texas. (By that I do not mean to say that Texas is a foreign country!) One of you also plans to work for Habitat for Humanity, one of you plans to work for Teach for America in the urban schools of Los Angeles, and at least five will do work in science labs or graduate schools. Mark Kaduboski, a History major, Treasurer of the Senior Class, and Cox for Heavyweight Crew, said: “It’s great that Yale is in New Haven. This city provides so many opportunities to develop perspective, to become engaged in work and aspirations beyond ourselves and our immediate academic interests and concerns. New Haven has given me a new look on things, a new appreciation for what we can and should do together in service to our community.” He speaks for some 2,000 Yale College and Graduate School students who do volunteer work in New Haven. I hope that you will take this tradition of service into your professional and civic lives where you settle and live.

But there is still another theme in the Senior statements that I suspect the Seniors themselves did not see. It is that, conscious or not, all of you have been engaged in some form of teaching or sharing. Whether as Freshman Counselors, or teaching in Hungary or Seoul or South Texas or East L.A., or working with infants and toddlers in the Yale-New Haven Hospital, you have been teaching. And more of you plan to attend graduate school, leading perhaps to a teaching career. A delightful expression of this intent was by Kate Baicker, an Economics major, former President of the Yale College Council, and intramural athlete, who said, “While here, I have grown enchanted with the idea of a university—not just Yale but all universities. I plan to be in academia for the rest of my life. That is not something I planned before coming to Yale but something that developed here. I am going to Harvard next year, to study economics, with an eye on an academic career. My goal is to drift back and forth between academia and policy-making in government, to be one of those academics who is called upon to create economic policy and then return to teaching and research. Like Jim Tobin—though I can’t compare myself to him just yet.”
At a recent meeting with Professor Tobin, who is a Nobel Prize winner, I warned him that Kate might emulate him. He smiled knowingly.

This leads me to the crux of my remarks here today. It is simply that you must continue to share what you have learned, in whatever way you can, as a parallel task to that of your professional career. The main challenge is to set your sights not just on your career but on the future of generations younger than you. By so doing, you will better the prospects for a future America about which we collectively now seem so gloomy or ambivalent and concerning which my colleague Paul Kennedy seems so pessimistic. By so doing, you may well guarantee that the next generation indeed will have the opportunities you have had, because of your own parents’ overwhelming concern for your future.

And finally I ask you as a part of that teaching and learning task, to concern yourselves with education itself, whether at the kindergarten, public school, or post-graduate level. We are going through a bad period in the educational world just now. As with the issue of health care, we are having a crisis of confidence about an educational system of which we were once so proud. We debate about public versus private schools, political correctness in teaching, about why Johnny can’t read or add or subtract, about the decline of traditional learning, the failure to train adequately in the sciences, and the failure—in James Laney’s words—to educate the heart by teaching wisdom and virtue along with skills and expertise. It will surely stand as one of the bitter ironies of our time that we entered an age of science and technology at a moment when our students were faltering, indeed, failing in those very fields.

I ask you to put your considerable talents and insights to work on behalf of a new role for colleges and universities in the 21st century, to assist us by deciding how to respond to various pressing issues, among them the outrageous cost of modern education, the exploration of how to help society prepare for an age of high technology, and the development of policies that assist us in solving environmental, urban and health problems. I ask you ever to entertain the idea that what you have learned you must question and even scrap tomorrow, but with the hope that you, in Jefferson’s words, have so fixed reason on her seat that we can adjust and survive.

Although at the beginning of my remarks it did not sound as if I would end on an optimistic note, I now wish to do so, partly because I see in you high promise as caring citizens and leaders, with an aptitude for continual learning. I see in your engagement in such a process the way through which you will avoid being overwhelmed by the immediacy of the present I mentioned earlier, the particularity that chisels away haphazardly at the edges of lives, and to construct a more holistic view of ourselves and
of ourselves in the world. It is through such understanding that we can all
more firmly and more contentedly make our contributions as individuals,
as members of families, and as citizens committed to securing the public
good.

Similarly, I see in universities a willingness to adjust and try new
things, especially with a new generation of leaders at the Ivy schools, at
Duke, Chicago, Stanford, and at scores of outstanding public universities. I
note with pleasure that my successor, Richard Levin, is the same age as most
leaders of the American revolution. I note in passing that while universities
always seem in crisis or on the brink of dissolution, somehow they have
survived as an institution for 800 years, longer than any government or any
business. Let us use this curious, ever changing, but resilient institution of
which you are becoming a part as an instrument to deal with the 21st cen-
tury.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Class of 1993:

I wish you the good fortune of perpetual learning, continued self-
discovery, lives enriched by a commitment to service. Use what you have
learned at Yale to chart a course in your lives, and selflessly and purposefully
and enthusiastically help others to chart their courses as well. Your Yale
education will be an agent of stability as well as of transformation, enabling
you to find perspectives in the past and to affirm the present, to free your
imaginations, to transcend the immediate, to empower your commitment
to the possible. I wish you satisfaction and joy in that noble and exhilarat-
ing endeavor.