
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
The Master Speech Files, 1898, 1910-1945

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1929 June 12

Fordham University Commencement

Part of Address made at
Fordham University Commencement
Exercises--New York City
June 12, 1929

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A friend of mine from the West was recently airing his opinions of the State of New York, and spoke somewhat as follows: "The trouble with you people from New York is that you think you own the earth. You do not know that the rest of the country exists, or if you do know that there is such a thing as the West and the South your attitude towards us is one of patronizing superiority. The very motto of your state is the acme of egotism - EXCELSIOR."

That has started me to a consideration of just what we mean by the motto of our state, and I think that on the surface there is some justification for the feeling expressed by my western friend about that word EXCELSIOR.

If we look no further than the superficial connotation of New York's motto, it brings before us visions of chamber of commerce drives and boosting campaigns and boastful claims which have characterized so many of our American communities during the past quarter century. Superficially, I think of the Florida boom which staked out more lots than there were inhabitants in the whole of the United States, or the claim of our California friends that the Golden State has many definite advantages not yet offered by Heaven.

There are two ways of translating the motto of our state. One is the very false notion that we boast of superiority in

material things over our fellow Americans in any part of the United States. The day of boasting and of superlative comparisons is ^{at an end} ~~coming~~ to a close. That period went well perhaps with the adolescent stage of our nation's life. It went well with the founding of new towns, with the opening up of the prairies, with the establishing of great industries. It was born of enthusiasm and salesmanship and was attended by all of the crudities and extravagances of the development of a nation which is after all only just arriving at mature manhood.

We of the State of New York in the days gone by may have been boastful. We may have taken undue pride in mere size and wealth of material things. That our great Metropolis has for a century led all the other cities in population and in wealth; that as a state we have been the first on the list of sister states in many lines of agriculture and of industry, may have justified our neighbor Americans to interpret that word EXCELSIOR mistakenly, is perhaps not strange.

And yet that is not the definition or the interpretation which I would give to our motto. There is a finer and a higher translation. The English word excel gives perhaps the unfortunate suggestion of comparison and especially comparison in the material things of life. I prefer to think of our motto in more spiritual terms -- in the sense of a great community of fellow beings striving towards a goal -- or in the

spirit of the plea of Emerson that we hitch our wagon to a star.

Let us cast aside the comparative thought which the word superiority suggests, the thought of some kind of rank or class or position of leadership. In a mere organization for world[^] purposes, - an aggregation of human beings known as a great business corporation, or an army for war, or the machinery of a government, - rank and positions of ^{comparative} command are perhaps necessary. Yet there is another kind of organization or army where there are no officers, no generals, no orders of the day or written laws. These armies are populations and these populations are, in the final judgment of God and man, judged not by the glamour and trappings of their captains of industry, their Mayors, their Governors and their Presidents, but rather by the individual standards and aspirations of the privates in their ranks; and in these armies of men, women and children, the rule is not the constitution or the written law but rather the spiritual teaching summed up in the great divine dual command:

" ... Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

" This is the first and great commandment.

" And the second is like unto it, - Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

To me the word EXCELSIOR means very clearly and very simply the seeking of a purpose for the human race, - the goal set forth in that divine command.

To live up to that great motto in its right interpretation should be the goal of our state. To think of that motto in its spiritual aspect, to think of it in connection with our duty to our fellowmen, to think of it in the light of the Golden Rule, will mean that the twelve million people who by the grace of God chance to be citizens of the human political unit known as the State of New York, will in the days to come measure up more widely and more truly to the highest teachings of religion and to the best purposes of our American civilization.

It is true that we are jostled and rushed from day to day in our material lives by the competition and the excitement of material things; it is true that we are tempted every day of our lives to make material prosperity the aim of our lives; it is true that the tendency of the age is to give human credit in chief part to those who have forged to the front in industry and in finance.

Nevertheless, there seems to me to be beneath the surface a small yet vigorous and growing trend towards higher purposes. More and more we hear that same younger generation (which some of the elder call headstrong and heedless) speaking of a happiness which is not measured by dollars and cents.

[June 12, 1929]

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At Fordham University Commencement Exercises, New York City,
June 12, 1929

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Governor Roosevelt Receives Degree—Doctor Laws

I am deeply honored and personally very happy to take part in the Fordham Commencement. Today makes it possible for me to give myself the very high privilege of calling myself a fellow alumnus of Fordham and thus to take my place at the side of you, who graduate today, and also at the side of the large number of Fordham graduates, who, for many years, have been my friends and associates in the civic and social life of the State of New York.

To you, who are completing your academic preparation, I want to speak very briefly in regard to the heritage of American citizenship which is yours.

A friend of mine from the West was recently airing his opinions of the State of New York and spoke somewhat as follows:

"The trouble with you people from New York is that you think you own the earth. You do not know that the rest of the country exists, or if you do know that there is such a thing as the West or the South your attitude towards us is one of patronizing superiority. The very motto of your state is the acme of egotism—*Excelsior*."

That has impelled me to a consideration of just what we mean by the motto of our State, and I think that on the surface there is some justification for the feeling expressed by my western friend about that word *Excelsior*.

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There are two schools of thought—those who see nothing in the next fifty years but an intensifying of the materialism, a striving for power through wealth, and the breaking down of many of the older concepts which have characterized the past fifty years—and, on the other hand, those who, while wholly in sympathy with the improvement of the physical and financial conditions surrounding modern civilization, see an opportunity to lead, because of these improved conditions, happier and more useful lives.

It is, of course, a fact that, especially during recent years, more and more young men and young women are making definite choice of careers which they know will never make them millionaires, careers in the church, in the field of teaching, in the professions of social service and in the arts and sciences. They seek only the assurance that they may live their lives without becoming objects of charity and be able to devote themselves to the purposes to which their minds, rather than their pockets, call.

We, in the City and State of New York, have made great contributions in the past to the non-materialistic side of American life and these contributions have borne fruit in every part of our land. We have before us the opportunity of still further service throughout America.

And this brings forward again the thought that if we are to extend that service outside our own borders, we must be competent to think in terms of the whole American population, and not merely in terms of our own more narrow circle. One of the greatest privileges which I have had in connection with civic service has been the chance which it has given me to learn something of the United States as a whole. It is true that many people in other parts of the country do not understand the higher purposes of the State of New York, but it is also true that some of us in the State of New York are not sufficiently understanding of the higher aims and purposes of our fellow citizens in other parts of the Nation.

In the final analysis, there is much of truth in the thought that one cannot hate a person whom one knows. Most prejudice is founded on ignorance. Most wrong thinking and most dislike is on the part of those who are strangers.

Once upon a time when Theodore Roosevelt was President he exploded with the remark: "I wish that for five minutes I could be President and Congress, too. The occasion was the defeat in the Congress of one of his pet measures for the establishment of a National Park System throughout the country. He was asked what he would do in the event that he could have the dual authority for five minutes and he replied: "I would pass a law making it obligatory for every candidate for the two houses of Congress to file an affidavit beforehand that he had visited in every one of the forty-eight States of the union."

There is much that lies behind that thought. We see much purely local vision in the halls of Congress today and we see it in the halls of the Legislature in Albany.

That is why the broadness of the training of those who are your teachers in Fordham means so much in this University. They are men who have been educated in many parts of the world. They are men in whom has been inculcated the vision of all the nations of the earth. They are men who are not satisfied with the mere bestowal of a Bachelor's or a Doctor's degree, but who believe rightly that the highest education extends to the day of one's death.

I greet your preceptors as neighbors, for at Hyde Park the Novitiate of St. Andrew adjoins my home, and I can only say that I hope that they have found me as good a neighbor as I have found them.

And I greet His Eminence as a fellow soldier of the World War, for I well remember when I was in the Navy Department the splendid cooperation which he gave to me in those stirring times.

May I thank you again for this great honor which has come to me and wish for you, my fellow alumni of Fordham University, that deep happiness which comes from true service to mankind.