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"The Wizard of Oz Doesn't Live Here Anymore"

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**Honors Day Address
by Dr. Jerry Israel**

Illinois Wesleyan University



May 7, 1975

“The Wizard of Oz Doesn't Live Here Anymore”

It is, if I may use our word for the day, an honor for me, a reasonably new member of the Wesleyan faculty, to address you this morning. My only regret is that I have only been able to know a small number of the class of '75 and for too short a time. Yet that fact reminds me, and I hope you, of the fragile and transitory quality of university life. Though dramatic changes are perhaps reserved to the occasional chaos of years like the late 1960's when most of us were in different places and roles, colleges are always undergoing dramatic migrations. What other enterprise or organism turns over 25 percent of its population each year, half its personality in two and undergoes a complete metamorphosis in four? No small college, which is most of all a composite of its student body, looks the same today as it did in 1971. Nor will it look the same in 1979. The historian sees this most clearly. Each fall I get a year older and my students get, in terms of their experience and memory, a year younger. Thus, to you, the graduating class, the Kennedy assassination is perhaps the first thing remembered and that as a third grade blur. Your brothers and sisters in the class of 1980 will probably think that the Kennedy involved was Robert—for John will be to them what Dwight Eisenhower was to you and in turn what Franklin Roosevelt was to me. The images and scratches on our minds are different; it is hard to communicate about shared facts let alone assumptions. I am always reminded of the freshman who once asked incredibly, “Who was Hitler?”

This problem suggests that one can't, as Thomas Wolfe knew, go home again even to the security blanket of a seemingly safe and stable campus. Nothing is as dated as last year's college paper or yearbook; the memories are to be cherished, the times were unique but they are gone. There is a pathos to the instant nostalgia of too many last lectures, fraternity banquets, and even honors days. The university is a backwards world: when, in fall, nature clings impossibly to life, we surge with activity; when the world around us blooms in spring, we sing *auld lang syne*.

Though a historian, and therefore a purveyor of trivia and nostalgia, I wish this morning to resist the temptation to review the glories and gore of the recent past. It would be possible. I even wrote the title in my head to discuss the year 1974-75 at IWU. “Course Units, Kansas City, and Community” was the alliterative handle in my mind, if any one cares. But I have cut that stillborn idea to try instead to use this moment to say what it is that

just may have been happening around us that will really be important—perhaps if we realize and act on it—even after the most diehard embers of the championship season have burnt out.

The people we honor today are, to some extent, heroes, and my remarks have something to say about success and heroism. I must confess that I had my title (only this one not discarded) before I had my speech. The historian talks always about turning points and watersheds—people rarely know they have been through them till they read about them—but somehow I feel we have recently witnessed one, like a glorious eclipse, rather visibly. It is the last quarter of the twentieth century now, the sun has set for the first time on the American empire, and most excitingly for me, my subject has come to life. A few days after registering my title, and several weeks before writing this speech, I awoke one Monday morning to discover that at another honors day, for Broadway theatre people, the actress, Ellyn Burstyn, and the musical, "The Wiz," had won Tony awards. Allow me to explain. Ms. Burstyn's honor was the second half of a unique sweep. Just weeks before, she had won an Oscar, the Hollywood honors day prize, for her role as an alienated middle-aged woman in the film, "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore." Now Alice, in case you haven't noticed, has fast become an American synonym for Everywoman. Note, for instance, in addition to Lewis Carroll's famous fable of "Alice in Wonderland," the more recent "Alice's Restaurant," "Go Ask Alice," and "Alice Cooper," all in one sense metaphors for something else. So my wheels were spinning—yet not complete—I had several elements at play, the role of fantasy, fable, dream, and metaphor—the sense of alienation (not going home again, not living here anymore) but finally and most importantly, the juxtaposition with the Wiz—an almost all black musical re-enactment of the remarkably popular "Wizard of Oz."

I was and remain struck by the shortening of the name—we know the Wizard so well, we have all grown up with him, that we can modernize and familiarize him as the good ole Wiz—more importantly we have come to see the the Wiz as a social, yes even political, symbol; I suggest a symbol of a hero, but a false one—not a *bad* guy, with a lot of bluff, but really a fraud. Before you think this is a spoof—and it is most assuredly not—recall please that the 1941 musical with Judy Garland *et.al.*, was based on the turn of the century tale

which was a political satire. Written by a Kansas Populist, or farm agitator, the whole thing reeked of symbolism—the yellow brick road (gold), the Emerald City (urban America), the Cowardly Lion (William Jennings Bryan), the Tin Man (industrial workers), the Scarecrow (farmers, without a brain, or an ideology), the Wicked Witch of the East (bankers), Dorothy—alas more properly named Alice (every man), the manipulated munchkins, and mostly the Wizard, who seemed to control everything and have all the answers, yet who, when curtain removed, appeared to control nothing but a hokus pokus box of conjuring tricks. We remember, of course, the movie, not the book—no film or piece of culture has been seen by more impressionable people. I find only the “Wizard of Oz” and Monopoly to be the images which all my students can share equally for purposes of discussion and metaphor in American history. (If you invite me back, we can talk about the latter, a depression board game—similarly involved in a political-social fable acted out on the boardwalk or other less desirable places in Atlantic City). The film version of the “Wizard of Oz” completed the speech’s necessary imagery. It is about the quest for a dream—“somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there’s a land that I’ve heard of once in a lullaby.” Dorothy is the twentieth century’s Don Quixote, the ultimate visionary—“if happy little blue-birds fly above the rainbow, why, oh, why can’t I?”

Now let’s try to put it together. Americans have had a dream. It used to be called a way of life. It was a noble dream of, as the Republicans put it in 1952, peace and prosperity. Yet in the last half century, the reality for some has been closer to war and depression as American variables. Thus, it has become commonplace to say that the dream is dead or perhaps never existed. In “Death of a Salesman,” Arthur Miller said that while the elder Loman brother, Ben, had walked into the jungle at 17 and walked out at 21 and, by God, he was rich—that modern Americans are like Willy Loman, following a false sense of—eventually self-destructing—values. In “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolff,” Edward Albee is even bolder. George and Martha’s baby is a metaphor for the American dream (the names of the characters just happen to be those of our first presidential family, “the father of the country,” George, just happens to be a historian, etc., etc.) but we discover, alas and alack, that the baby doesn’t exist. They just talk about it to pass the time; it is, Albee sug-

gests, a perverted lie.

Whether or not one goes all the way to this extreme condemnation, Americans have obviously begun in the recent past to question their dream. One thing, until almost yesterday, has kept the faith together. It has been an overwhelming sense of hero-worship in our culture. In good times, the heroes were the apostles of the dream. In bad, questioning times they at least served as beacons of hope that all might not be lost. Thus we have felt like Dorothy and her band on the road to Oz that somehow, somewhere there is someone who can save us, rekindle our faith and hope, our sense of purpose. Thus people always put the solution to the malaise in terms of someone leading us out of the wilderness—"who is the 'man' in 1976" is one you still hear. Most of our heroes, increasingly in the 20th century, have been political figures—especially federal government leaders, most obviously Presidents. I wish there were time, however, to look at other categories of heroes—in sports for instance—where contemporary people act out dramas instead of living them in reality—in technology, where we watch in amazement the manipulation of machinery—in business, where creative genius is not dead—in the military, where courage overcomes adversity. The great names, most of them from pre-depression days, represent these categories in the American pantheon: Ruth, Lindbergh, Ford, MacArthur, just to name a few.

But, primarily Washington has been our Emerald City. We speak of writing letters and sending our pleas to Washington as if it were a living, breathing place. Indeed, the name, that of our founding father, has a high degree of anthropomorphic quality and the President of the United States has been our Wiz. The popular, highly rated presidents by laymen and historians alike, have been the seemingly energetic reformers, the world-savers as H. L. Mencken described Woodrow Wilson in the Twenties. The bad presidents have been the dull ones, the Coolidges and Eisenhowers, who slept a lot or played golf a lot, who stuttered, and didn't have the fancy rhetoric. They are so easy to make fun of—Coolidge, when asked what the minister had preached on, said sin; when asked what he had to say, said he was against it. Eisenhower, when queried on Richard Nixon's contributions as vice president replied, "Well, give me a week and I'll let you know." No Camelot there, no New Deals or torches passed, no Oz-like powers. Yet, perhaps restraint, measured words and deeds, and

caution.

At last, to the point and then the point's possible repercussions. John Dean, that erstwhile journalist, whose scruples were not worthy of the law—said he wasn't sure, when examined by the Senate Watergate Committee, what the President had said exactly. Well, *why?* the Senators pressed him—well sir the aide-de-camp went on, I wasn't used to being in the Oval Office, you see, I mean, well gosh darn, you know, I was talking to the *President of the United States*. Aha, the Oval Office, the central shrine—Oz incarnate, that place where resides the man with his finger on the nuclear trigger, the man with the eight T. V.'s to watch all the news, the man with hot and cold running Fresca machines, the man with Air Force One parked outside the door, the man who is always followed about by a sentry with a little black blow-up-the-world box, the man who can only sleep four or five hours a night, the man who calls up aides and asks them what they are doing... Mr. Omniscient and Omnipotent, the Imperial President, the Wizard of Oz. To hear Dean, one would think Richard Milhous Nixon sat on a levitated desk, nine feet in the air with smoke pouring out from beneath, wore a fez, a turban and spoke from a great amplifier in his stomach. Instead he was a man, a mortal, oh, so mortal, who ate cottage cheese, spoke the King's English and cheated on his income tax. And those of you who would cast the first stone take heed. The Prez of the United States is nothing but a man. We are all mortal—some of us eat cottage cheese and even a few cheat on our income tax or exceed the speed limit or whatever. When all other heroes had become anti-heroes, when the heavyweight champion was a draft dodger, when King Arthur's younger brother caroused and drank beer in public, when Joyce Brothers held crib sheets with the answers to the \$64,000 questions, when the only thing uniting us was common distaste for our anti-heroes, when even God was dead—at least we had the President of Oz, I mean of US, to worship and revere. Then Watergate (or perhaps first Vietnam). The Wiz was in trouble when mothers with babies in tow screamed "hey hey LBJ how many kids have you killed today"... the man with the greatest mandate turned out to be the grandest fraud. The hero was dead.

Most people against this conclusion despair, bury their heads and yearn for a charismatic leader—we are not great because we have no one to follow. Surely the man on horseback or rocket may yet appear. Like Jonathan Winters in the film "The Loved One" or Slim

Pickens in "Dr. Strangelove," he may ride his helicopter to the roof or his rocket to the bowels of the earth. John Glenn, the astronaut turned Senator, might conceivably stay in Air Force One and orbit the earth as President, thus justifying my image of Dean's image of the Presidency. On the other hand, is there another alternative? Is it possible that heroes, like dreams, were fantasies all along? Surely Richard Nixon was not, despite the simultaneous timing of "The Exorcist" with Watergate, the devil. Perhaps, despite the contemporary popularity of disaster movies, we are not doomed. Perhaps charisma, a word you all should have learned somewhere by now, is a dangerous empty thing. At the national level, David Broder suggests that Gerald Ford is not Richard Nixon—he is the plebian, not the imperial, president. Sometimes his socks don't match, he does sleep, watch TV, drink a beer. He is human, and he will therefore have shortcomings. If we can allow ourselves the mature luxury to admit that we are not perfect, nor are our heroes, does it not open exciting possibilities? Can the focus shift from leaders to issues, from the federal government to local government, from government at all back to private enterprise?

We honor today not heroes but people who have no foolproof solutions, no perfection (though they can surely strive for it). If we have problems and feelings of inadequacy about course unit systems, failures of community or anything else, isn't that a healthy sign? Isn't that how we know we are alive? I am not sure if he ever did but I think I am rather proud to say that at IWU the Wizard of Oz doesn't live here anymore. Perhaps all Americans can soon realize that same perception. No one thing will save us—we can and must save ourselves. Such a judgment will require new assumptions. Americans will have difficulty shaking off the feeling that the Wiz must protect us but we have done the personally hard things before as individuals and collectively therefore as a people and nation. I have always been stirred by the words of James Russell Lowell written on the eve of the Civil War and found in the hymnal—number 242. I have vowed to myself someday to use them at some such moment—even if it was not my own "dream," I know of no better time nor way to conclude—"New occasions teach new duties, times makes ancient good uncouth, they must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth." Good luck to those real people, not heroes, who still very much live here, whom we honor today.



DR. JERRY M. ISRAEL is associate professor and chairman of the history department. He received his bachelor of arts degree, magna cum laude, from New York University, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. In 1963, he earned a master's degree from the University of Michigan and, in 1967, a doctor of philosophy degree from Rutgers University. Dr. Israel was a member of the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Texas - El Paso and Northern Illinois University. Publications include "For God, For China, and For Yale" (American History Review, 1970) and "The Missionary Catalyst: Bishop Bashford and the Social Gospel in China" (Methodist History, 1975), as well as his doctoral dissertation. He is a member of the School Board of the Illinois Department of Corrections and the American Historical Association. He is married and the father of three.