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Vassar College
Commencement
Address
By
C. Everett Koop, MD, ScD

Poughkeepsie, NY

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I was giving quite a collection of commencement speeches in 1990. I have recorded elsewhere in this archive that 1990 was the year I had turned down 30 offers of honorary degrees. I gave this particular address in the afternoon and had to fly, courtesy of a friend with a private jet from there to Providence, RI in order to give the commencement address to the graduates of Brown Medical School the following morning.

Vassar was a familiar place to me. I had courted my wife there after having met her at Dartmouth Winter Carnival in 1936 and married her at the Vassar Alumni House in Poughkeepsie on September 19th, 1938, sixty-five years before writing this introduction. I don't know for sure, but judging from the response of the audience when I announced it, I may have been the only Vassar commencement speaker that had found his way up the back stairs of Jocelyn Hall to avoid the monitors checking visitors at the front door. During the years I was in college, Vassar was a school for girls, liberal then, liberal now. After attending a reception of the faculty, the afternoon before I was to give the commencement address, I didn't think what I had written would go over very well with them and spent some time in the evening contemplating re-writing it. Then after reading it again and reminding myself that part of the message was that I said what I believed, I decided to give it as written. It must have been satisfactory, because I got a standing ovation, which I really had not anticipated.

For those who have not read my memoirs, this is a good and true account how I met my wife Betty, how we became engaged, how she supported me in every way during my life as a medical student, surgeon, and Surgeon General.

There was also some homely philosophy about being a wife and mother. I took great umbrage at the Wellesley student's demonstration against the selection of Barbara Bush as their commencement speaker, because she was "only a wife and mother". So was my wife: that's the way we both wanted it, but in the process, she became confidante and advisor to one of the better-known Surgeons General of the 20th century.