

Martin Heidegger

The Reunion Speech

Twenty-five Years after Our Graduation

Reunion in Konstanz on May 26-27, 1934

Translated by W.H.F. Altman

Dear classmates!

Our reunion—after twenty-five years and more—might well incline us only to be concerned with remembrance and the past. But even granted that such is not the case, nevertheless our first communal action must yet remain the thought of our *fallen comrades*.

Each human being dies his own death. And this last and ultimate business of existence can never be performed for anyone by another. Death remains the deepest mystery of life. This is why we grow so little used to it and are hardly in a condition to think it out in its essence.

The representation of death and the relationship to it is for the individual human being, for groups of human beings and even for an entire nation, always the measure of its currently dominant conception of life.

Our comrades died an *early* death; but this early death was the most beautiful and greatest death. The greatest death: because it could become the highest sacrifice for the destiny of the nation. The most beautiful death: because they died this death not in the ebb, or flight and shattering of their life-impulse while in the still (...) time of the (...), but rather when this death was a lavish self-expenditure out of the still undiminished fullness of youth's life-force.

That which in the old days here at Konstanz—again now as if new—invaded and held us captive: the lake and its magic, the incomparability of its shores and its peace, these scenes probably gathered themselves together one last time as the last manifestation of life before the inner eyes of our dying comrades.

But this unhelpful chatter about their death becomes all too easily a distortion. The dead would not want to hear such speeches: for now they hear only—as the wisdom of the ancient Greeks tells us—the silence and the stillness. Silence—let that be our conversation with them. And so I ask you: please rise and think of them.—

But what is going on in this mere memory of the fallen? We are making the death of our comrades the subject of a personal, comradely recollection. This gives the appearance that we are reaching back to a past event that by now is already some twenty years distant from us—an event that we might gently relegate to some place in our memory—as though it depends on us whether it might still be there today or not.

But that is all an illusion. For the Great War comes over us *now* for the first time. Our awakening to the two million dead in all those endless graves—which the borders of the Reich and German Austria wear like some mysterious crown—only now begins.

The Great War becomes today for us Germans—for us first and foremost among all peoples—the *historical* actuality of our existence for the first time. For history is not that which has been nor even what presents itself but rather what *is to come* and our task with respect to it.

We still are all too ready to repeatedly gauge everything around us with traditional concepts and the measurements of the long-winded talker.

But the *actuality* of this gigantic event that we call the First World War is even now gradually entering a realm beyond the question of the guilt or innocence of its origins, beyond all questions of imperialism or pacifism.

The War, in its immediate conclusion, has indeed still not produced any decision, neither for the winners nor for the defeated; the mere result of the War is certainly not the decision. This yet stands ahead of us: it is a spiritual matter that concerns the entire earth.

The question to be decided is: which nation possesses the inner strength to grow towards the great test that now for the first time has emerged and becomes manifest.—It is *the question to the nations* about the originality of their national arrangements, about the rank and legitimacy of their political will to lead, about the cohesion of their spiritual world, about the health of their national life-force, about their strength to withstand this historical disaster.

The World War puts these questions about the entire living totality of each individual nation. And the deciding of this question divides the nations into the declining and the growing.

We stand in the midst of this decision.

And when we try to understand the meaning of the new German reality, then we must say: the new movement, which now courses through this nation, is the deepest and widest concern for our nation's freedom.

For us, freedom does not mean the unchecked license of actions and conduct but rather: *adhesion to the innermost law* and the institutions of our essence. Freedom means: the gathering of each power that confirms

the nation in its historical and spiritual position. Freedom means the awakening and commitment of the will of the nation to its own innermost mission.

That is the authentic sense of *German Socialism*. It signifies no mere alteration in the conception of society, it does not mean a *barren equalization*, it does not signify the spontaneous striving for some undefined *common good*.

German Socialism is the battle over the measure and laws of our nation's essence-oriented institutions; German Socialism wants an order of merit based on inner confirmation and achievement: it wants the *inviolability of service* and the *absolute honor* of all *labor*.

That is what we mean by *national freedom*.

The liberation that leads to this freedom demands a complete reconstitution of the entire structure of the nation—its groups, occupations, classes, and every individual.

But this reconstitution can only be the product of an ongoing re-education. This again stands on the basis of *two great pre-conditions*.

The first is the overcoming of the *whole bourgeois essence*; in other words, of that behavior which from first to last only sees what is repellant, inadequate, and noisy; the behavior that absorbs itself in minutia and half-way measures; the behavior that never wants to see and never can see the great and most distant, the unique and truly powerful.

And the *second precondition* for the future re-education of the nation is: destruction of that strange unreal world of illusion in which we moved about before the War and which flared up once again *after* the War and degenerated into lawlessness: that characteristic mish-mash of phony humanism—an empty patriotism and a Christianity grown indecisive—with which a cowardly mendacity in all essentials comes along in tow: cant on the one side and impertinence on the other. All of this must now be completely burnt to ashes.

We stand before the gigantic assignment: to apply the transformative power of the Great War—which now is taking hold of our people and taking them out beyond—first and foremost to our future actions and being.

And our generation is the *passage* and the *bridge*.

It is not the twenty-fifth reunion but the need for a spiritual decision that brings us together today in a new comradeship. It is not *we* who, through memory, recall our dead for the fleeting moment of a memorial service but rather it is *they*—the dead—who are compelling us to a decision and to the confirmation.

From us is demanded the enduring courage, the clear knowledge, the genuine measures, the belief in the mission of the people.

The Great War must now be *spiritually* won by us, i.e., battle will become the *innermost law* of our existence. And we are taking up anew that deep wisdom which one of the greatest and earliest thinkers of the

Greeks pronounced—that people related to us by race and by essence—that saying of *Heraclitus*, which we generally know and repeat only in its well-worn and mutilated form: “Battle is the father of all things.” It says: [Fragment 53]: ‘Battle is the producer of all things—but of all things also the ruler—; it indeed makes some manifest as gods, the others as men, some it gives forth as slaves, the others as masters.’

This would tell us that the power of battle holds sway in the whole being of things and humans in a *double sense*: as the power of *production* and as the power of *preservation*. Battle produces things not just to replicate itself from them as soon as they are established and have discovered their actuality; but rather battle *preserves* and *uniquely* maintains things in their essential condition.

In general, therefore: where this productive battle is absent begins stagnation, equalization, mediocrity, backsliding, harmlessness, atrophy and decay.

For the bourgeois, battle is always only argument, quarrelsome wrangling, and a disruption.—For essential men, battle is the *great test* of all being: through it is decided whether we are slaves to ourselves or masters, whether we incline to live so as to make what is already small even smaller, or whether we bring forth the will and inner power to continuously make greater that which is great.

Human beings must first become great in the ground of their essence in order to see great things and advance in obedience to them.

What that false doctrine of modern thought would have us believe is absolutely untrue: that a civil society, formed from collected individuals, is the precondition for a cohesive obedience. Rather is it the exact reverse: obedience, that binding of oneself to the will of the leader, first creates community.

We who belong to this fully mystical comradeship with our dead comrades; our generation is the bridge to spiritual and historical victory in the Great War.

But only that which has been prepared long in advance can build from the ground up for the distant future—, only what has been decided and which maintains itself permanently in that decision is able to decide for distant centuries.

Mere opinions and theories are not effective, programs and organizations have no binding power but only this alone: heart to heart and shoulder to shoulder!

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Sources:

Appendix to Altman’s [Martin Heidegger and the First World War](#) (Lexington 2012).

The German original can be found at: Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe 16, Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 279-284.

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