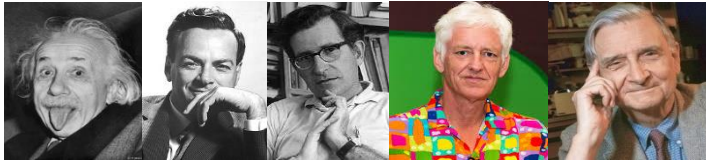


The Scientists



The Writers



The Builders



The Investors



The Entertainers



The Leaders



Dear Graduates...

(Life lessons for recent grads, current students, dropouts, and everyone else too)

Compiled and Introduced by Kevin Gao

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“道可道，非常道。”

(The Way that can be known, is not The Way.)

— 老子 (Lao Zi)

“*nanos gigantum humeris insidentes*”

(If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants)

— Bernard of Chartres (Original expression)

— Isaac Newton (English expression)

“*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*”

— George Santayana

“*Only a fool learns from his own mistakes. The wise man learns from the mistakes of others.*”

— Otto von Bismarck

“多学习。”

(More studying/study more.)

— My Parents

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Introduction

I'll keep this short since no one is here to read *my* thoughts.

*If you haven't read the quotes on the previous page, go read them. And think about them. Those 5 quotes summarize and represent my philosophy and motivations for creating this compilation.

Growing up, I spent a lot of time with books. At school, I spent my lunches and afternoons in the library. At home, I set up shop next to the bookshelf.

*Note: I didn't spend *all* my time reading; I did play a number of sports (tennis, golf, running, to name a few) as well. But if I wasn't with family or playing sports, I was probably reading.

While I read everything, I've always had this obsession with the sci-fi genre – time travel, teleportation, multi-dimensional travel, mind reading, conversing with the dead, etc. While we don't have the technology to physically do these, we do have the ability to.

How?

By reading.

I've traveled through time (history, political science, sci-fi), teleported across the world (travel, photography, culture), explored multiple dimensions (fantasy, comics, manga, alternative history), read people's minds (autobiographies), and conversed with the dead (letters, biographies).

What you read shapes who you are. And the more you read, the more you learn. You internalize lessons. You make connections (between topics). You explore new worlds. You make new friends—both dead and alive. The more you read, the more you can do.

Reading is a superpower. With nothing but a book and your thoughts, you can do anything, explore anywhere, learn anything. You can conjure something out of nothing. You are trading time for knowledge—what used to be empty space in your brain becomes knowledge. If you ask me, this is the epitome of alchemy—not turning lead to gold. Besides, knowledge is far more valuable than gold.

And the best part? Knowledge compounds. So the more you read, the better you get at reading. The more you learn, the better you get at learning. The more you know, well, the more you know. And the more you know, the more you can do.

*Note: Yes, this paragraph is similar to the one above, but that's because this is an important point.

But most importantly, reading is fun!

Now, why commencement speeches? To me, commencement speeches are the distillations of a person's life learnings into a few key lessons delivered in the span of 20-30 minutes. They're filled with personal anecdotes, history lessons, popular culture references, science concepts, unique insights, and clever jokes. They're short, fun to read, and packed with knowledge.

Now, enough from me. I hope you enjoy this compilation!

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Albert Einstein at Swarthmore College

June 6, 1938

If you will allow me, I should like first to express the great pleasure [that] President Aydelotte's invitation has procured for me, by giving me an opportunity to speak before this Quaker college. During many years I have witnessed, with admiration and respect, how the Society of Friends [has] labored in the whole world, as unselfishly as usefully, to mitigate the sufferings of men, and to fill the realities of daily life with the teachings of Christ, in their innermost sense. Every man, whoever he may be, if he has a concern for a better fate and a more decent conduct for the world, owes to the Society of Friends profound gratitude. This Society provides a happy testimony against the view that, as has been said, all organization kills the spirit [that] had created it.

We all know, from what we experience with and within ourselves, that our conscious acts spring from our desires and our fears. Intuition tells us that that is true also of our fellows and of the higher animals. We all try to escape pain and death, while we seek what is pleasant. We all are ruled in what we do by impulses; and these impulses are so organized that our actions in general serve for our self-preservation and that of race. Hunger, love, pain, fear are some of those inner forces which rule the individual's instinct for self-preservation. At the same time, as social beings, we are moved in the relations with our fellow by such feelings as sympathy, pride, hate, need for power, pity, and so on. All these primary impulses, not easily described in words, are the springs of man's actions. All such action would cease if those powerful elemental forces were to cease stirring within us.

Though our conduct seems to be very different from that of the higher animals, the primary instincts are much alike in them and in us. The most evident difference springs from the important part [that] is played in man by a relatively strong power of imagination and by the capacity to think, aided as it is by language and other symbolic devices. Thought is the organizing factor in man, intersected between the casual primary instincts and the resulting actions. In that way, imagination and intelligence enter into our existence in the part of servants of the primary instincts. Through them, the primary instinct attaches itself to ends which become ever more distant. The instincts bring thought into action, and thought provokes intermediary actions inspired by emotions [that] are likewise related to the ultimate end. Through repeated performance, this process brings it about that ideas and beliefs acquire and retain a strong affective power even after the ends [that] gave them that power are long forgotten. In abnormal cases of such intensive borrowed emotions, which cling to objects emptied of their erstwhile affective meaning, we speak of fetishism.

Yet the process [that] I have indicated plays a very important part also in ordinary life. Indeed, there is no doubt that to this process - which one may describe as spiritualizing of the emotions and of thought - that to it man owes the most subtle and refined pleasures of which he is capable: the pleasure in the beauty of artistic creation and of logical trains of thought.

If I am putting before you today these elementary psychological ideas, it is not, as you may well imagine, from any ambition to deliver a learned lecture. The festive occasion [that] has brought us together as well as my own small knowledge in this field would forbid such a thing. I wanted to use these ideas merely as a means for considering, together with you, the dangers [that] are threatening the moral foundations of social life in our time. Let me add that what I shall have to say on the nature of these moral issues makes no claim to objective validity. It is rather something in the nature of a confession of my own view in this the most important of all human problems. If I discuss it as if it were a settled conception, that is merely so as to present my view as simply and clearly as possible.

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As far as I can see, there is one consideration [that] stands at the threshold of all moral teaching. If men as individuals surrender to the call of their elementary instincts, avoiding pain and seeking satisfaction only for their own selves, the result for them all taken together must be a state of insecurity, of fear, and of promiscuous misery. If, besides that, they use their intelligence from an individualist, i.e., a selfish standpoint, building up their life on the illusion of a happy, unattached existence, things will be hardly better. In comparison with the other elementary instincts and impulses, the emotions of love, of pity, and of friendship are too weak and too cramped to lead to a tolerable state of human society.

The solution of this problem, when freely considered, is simple enough, and it seems also to echo from the teachings of the wise men of the past always in the same strain: All men should let their conduct be guided by the same principles; and those principles should be such, that by following them there should accrue to all as great a measure as possible of security and satisfaction, and as small a measure as possible of suffering.

Of course, this general requirement is much too vague that we should be able to draw from it with confidence specific rules to guide the individuals in their actions. And indeed, these specific rules will have to change in keeping with changing circumstances. If this were the main difficulty that stands in the way of that deep conception, the millenary fate of man would have been incomparably happier than it actually was, or still is. Man would not have killed man, tortured each other, exploited each other by force and by guile.

The real difficulty, the difficulty which has baffled the sages of all times, is rather this: how we can make our teaching so potent in the emotional life of man that its influence should withstand the pressure of the elemental psychic forces in the individual? We do not know, of course, if the sages of the past have really asked themselves this question, consciously and in this form; but we do know they have tried to solve the problem.

Long before men were ripe, namely, to be faced with such a universal moral attitude, fear of the dangers of life had led them to attribute to various imaginary personal beings, not physically tangible, power to release those natural forces [that] men feared or perhaps welcomed. And they believed that those beings, [that] everywhere dominated their imagination were psychically made in their own image but were endowed with superhuman powers. These were the primitive precursors of the idea of God. Sprung in the first place from the fears which filled man's daily life, the belief in the existence of such beings and in their extraordinary powers has had an influence so strong that it is difficult for us to imagine on men and their conduct. Hence it is not surprising that those who set out to establish the moral idea, as embracing all men equally, did so by linking it closely with religion. And the fact that those moral claims were the same for all men, may have had much to do with the development of mankind's religious culture from polytheism to monotheism.

The universal moral idea thus owed its original psychological potency to that link with religion. Yet in another sense, that close association was fatal for the moral idea. Monotheistic religion acquired different forms with various peoples and groups. Although those differences were by no means fundamental, yet they soon were felt more strongly than the essentials that were common. And in that way religion often caused enmity and conflict, instead of binding mankind together with the universal moral idea.

Then came the growth of the natural sciences, with their great influence on thought and practical life, weakening still more in modern times the religious sentiment of the peoples. The causal and objective mode of thinking - though not necessarily in contradiction with the religious sphere - leaves in most people little room for a deepening religious sense. And because of the traditional close link between religion and morals, that has brought with it the last hundred years or so a serious weakening of moral

thought and sentiment. That, to my mind, is a main cause for the barbarization of political ways in our time. Taken together with the terrifying efficiency of the new technical means, that barbarization already forms a fearful threat for the civilized world.

Needless to say, one is glad that religion strives to work for the realization of the moral principle. Yet the moral imperative is not a matter for the church and religion alone but the most precious traditional possession of all mankind. Consider from this standpoint the position of the press, or of the schools with their competitive method! Everything is dominated by the cult of efficiency and of success, and not by the value of things and men in relation to the moral ends of human society. To that must be added the moral deterioration resulting from a ruthless economic struggle. The deliberate nurturing of the moral sense also outside the religious sphere, however, should help also in this, to lead men to look upon social problems as so many opportunities for joyous service toward a better life. For looked at from a simple human point of view, moral conduct does not mean merely a stern demand to renounce some of the desired joys of life but rather a sociable interest in a happier lot for all men.

This conception implies one requirement above all - that every individual should have the opportunity to develop gifts which may be latent in him. Alone in that way can the individual obtain the satisfaction to which he is justly entitled; and alone in that way can the community achieve its richest flowering. For everything that is really great and inspiring is created by the individual who can labor in freedom. Restriction is justified only insofar as it may be needed for the security of existence.

There is one other thing [that] follows from that conception - that we must not only tolerate differences between individuals and between groups, but we should indeed welcome them and look upon them as an enriching of our existence. That is the essence of all true tolerance; without tolerance in this widest sense there can be no question of true morality.

Morality in the sense here briefly indicated is not a fixed and stark system. It is rather a standpoint from which all questions [that] arise in life could and should be judged. It is a task never finished, something always present to guide our judgment and to inspire our conduct. Can you imagine that any man truly filled with this ideal could be content:

Were he to receive from his fellowmen a much greater return in goods and services than most other men ever receive?

Were his country because it feels itself for the time being militarily secure to stand aloof from the aspiration to create a super-national system of security and justice?

Could he look on passively, or perhaps even with indifference, when elsewhere in the world innocent people are being brutally persecuted, deprived of their rights or even massacred?

To ask these questions is to answer them!

Richard P. Feynman at California Institute of Technology

1974

Cargo Cult Science

Some remarks on science, pseudoscience, and learning how to not fool yourself. Caltech's 1974 commencement address.

During the Middle Ages there were all kinds of crazy ideas, such as that a piece of rhinoceros horn would increase potency. (Another crazy idea of the Middle Ages is these hats we have on today—which is too loose in my case.) Then a method was discovered for separating the ideas—which was to try one to see if it worked, and if it didn't work, to eliminate it. This method became organized, of course, into science. And it developed very well, so that we are now in the scientific age. It is such a scientific age, in fact, that we have difficulty in understanding how witch doctors could *ever* have existed, when nothing that they proposed ever really worked—or very little of it did.

But even today I meet lots of people who sooner or later get me into a conversation about UFO's, or astrology, or some form of mysticism, expanded consciousness, new types of awareness, ESP, and so forth. And I've concluded that it's *not* a scientific world.

Most people believe so many wonderful things that I decided to investigate why they did. And what has been referred to as my curiosity for investigation has landed me in a difficulty where I found so much junk to talk about that I can't do it in this talk. I'm overwhelmed. First I started out by investigating various ideas of mysticism, and mystic experiences. I went into isolation tanks (they're dark and quiet and you float in Epsom salts) and got many hours of hallucinations, so I know something about that. Then I went to Esalen, which is a hotbed of this kind of thought (it's a wonderful place; you should go visit there). Then I became overwhelmed. I didn't realize how *much* there was.

I was sitting, for example, in a hot bath and there's another guy and a girl in the bath. He says to the girl, "I'm learning massage and I wonder if I could practice on you?" She says OK, so she gets up on a table and he starts off on her foot—working on her big toe and pushing it around. Then he turns to what is apparently his instructor, and says, "I feel a kind of dent. Is that the pituitary?" And she says, "No, that's not the way it feels." I say, "You're a hell of a long way from the pituitary, man." And they both looked at me—I had blown my cover, you see—and she said, "It's reflexology." So I closed my eyes and appeared to be meditating.

That's just an example of the kind of things that overwhelm me. I also looked into extrasensory perception and PSI phenomena, and the latest craze there was Uri Geller, a man who is supposed to be able to bend keys by rubbing them with his finger. So I went to his hotel room, on his invitation, to see a demonstration of both mind reading and bending keys. He didn't do any mind reading that succeeded; nobody can read my mind, I guess. And my boy held a key and Geller rubbed it, and nothing happened. Then he told us it works better under water, and so you can picture all of us standing in the bathroom with the water turned on and the key under it, and him rubbing the key with his finger. Nothing happened. So I was unable to investigate that phenomenon.

But then I began to think, what else is there that we believe? (And I thought then about the witch doctors, and how easy it would have been to check on them by noticing that nothing really worked.) So I found things that even more people believe, such as that we have some knowledge of how to educate. There are big schools of reading methods and mathematics methods, and so forth, but if you notice, you'll see the reading scores keep going down—or hardly going up—in spite of the fact that we continually use these

same people to improve the methods. *There's* a witch doctor remedy that doesn't work. It ought to be looked into: how do they know that their method should work? Another example is how to treat criminals. We obviously have made no progress—lots of theory, but no progress—in decreasing the amount of crime by the method that we use to handle criminals.

Yet these things are said to be scientific. We study them. And I think ordinary people with commonsense ideas are intimidated by this pseudoscience. A teacher who has some good idea of how to teach her children to read is forced by the school system to do it some other way—or is even fooled by the school system into thinking that her method is not necessarily a good one. Or a parent of bad boys, after disciplining them in one way or another, feels guilty for the rest of her life because she didn't do “the right thing,” according to the experts.

So we really ought to look into theories that don't work, and science that isn't science.

I tried to find a principle for discovering more of these kinds of things, and came up with the following system. Any time you find yourself in a conversation at a cocktail party—in which you do not feel uncomfortable that the hostess might come around and say, “Why are you fellows talking shop?” or that your wife will come around and say, “Why are you flirting again?”—then you can be sure you are talking about something about which nobody knows anything.

Using this method, I discovered a few more topics that I had forgotten—among them the efficacy of various forms of psychotherapy. So I began to investigate through the library, and so on, and I have so much to tell you that I can't do it at all. I will have to limit myself to just a few little things. I'll concentrate on the things more people believe in. Maybe I will give a series of speeches next year on all these subjects. It will take a long time.

I think the educational and psychological studies I mentioned are examples of what I would like to call Cargo Cult Science. In the South Seas there is a Cargo Cult of people. During the war they saw airplanes land with lots of good materials, and they want the same thing to happen now. So they've arranged to make things like runways, to put fires along the sides of the runways, to make a wooden hut for a man to sit in, with two wooden pieces on his head like headphones and bars of bamboo sticking out like antennas—he's the controller—and they wait for the airplanes to land. They're doing everything right. The form is perfect. It looks exactly the way it looked before. But it doesn't work. No airplanes land. So I call these things Cargo Cult Science, because they follow all the apparent precepts and forms of scientific investigation, but they're missing something essential, because the planes don't land.

Now it behooves me, of course, to tell you what they're missing. But it would be just about as difficult to explain to the South Sea Islanders how they have to arrange things so that they get some wealth in their system. It is not something simple like telling them how to improve the shapes of the earphones. But there is *one* feature I notice that is generally missing in Cargo Cult Science. That is the idea that we all hope you have learned in studying science in school—we never explicitly say what this *is*, but just hope that you catch on by all the examples of scientific investigation. It is interesting, therefore, to bring it out now and speak of it explicitly. It's a kind of scientific integrity, a principle of scientific thought that corresponds to a kind of utter honesty—a kind of leaning over backwards. For example, if you're doing an experiment, you should report everything that you think might make it invalid—not only what you think is right about it: other causes that could possibly explain your results; and things you thought of that you've eliminated by some other experiment, and how they worked—to make sure the other fellow can tell they have been eliminated.

Details that could throw doubt on your interpretation must be given, if you know them. You must do the best you can—if you know anything at all wrong, or possibly wrong—to explain it. If you make a theory, for example, and advertise it, or put it out, then you must also put down all the facts that disagree with it, as well as those that agree with it. There is also a more subtle problem. When you have put a lot of ideas together to make an elaborate theory, you want to make sure, when explaining what it fits, that those things it fits are not just the things that gave you the idea for the theory; but that the finished theory makes something else come out right, in addition.

In summary, the idea is to try to give *all* of the information to help others to judge the value of your contribution; not just the information that leads to judgment in one particular direction or another.

The easiest way to explain this idea is to contrast it, for example, with advertising. Last night I heard that Wesson Oil doesn't soak through food. Well, that's true. It's not dishonest; but the thing I'm talking about is not just a matter of not being dishonest, it's a matter of scientific integrity, which is another level. The fact that should be added to that advertising statement is that *no* oils soak through food, if operated at a certain temperature. If operated at another temperature, they *all* will—including Wesson Oil. So it's the implication which has been conveyed, not the fact, which is true, and the difference is what we have to deal with.

We've learned from experience that the truth will out. Other experimenters will repeat your experiment and find out whether you were wrong or right. Nature's phenomena will agree or they'll disagree with your theory. And, although you may gain some temporary fame and excitement, you will not gain a good reputation as a scientist if you haven't tried to be very careful in this kind of work. And it's this type of integrity, this kind of care not to fool yourself, that is missing to a large extent in much of the research in Cargo Cult Science.

A great deal of their difficulty is, of course, the difficulty of the subject and the inapplicability of the scientific method to the subject. Nevertheless, it should be remarked that this is not the only difficulty. That's *why* the planes don't land—but they don't land.

We have learned a lot from experience about how to handle some of the ways we fool ourselves. One example: Millikan measured the charge on an electron by an experiment with falling oil drops and got an answer which we now know not to be quite right. It's a little bit off, because he had the incorrect value for the viscosity of air. It's interesting to look at the history of measurements of the charge of the electron, after Millikan. If you plot them as a function of time, you find that one is a little bigger than Millikan's, and the next one's a little bit bigger than that, and the next one's a little bit bigger than that, until finally they settle down to a number which is higher.

Why didn't they discover that the new number was higher right away? It's a thing that scientists are ashamed of—this history—because it's apparent that people did things like this: When they got a number that was too high above Millikan's, they thought something must be wrong—and they would look for and find a reason why something might be wrong. When they got a number closer to Millikan's value they didn't look so hard. And so they eliminated the numbers that were too far off, and did other things like that. We've learned those tricks nowadays, and now we don't have that kind of a disease.

But this long history of learning how to not fool ourselves—of having utter scientific integrity—is, I'm sorry to say, something that we haven't specifically included in any particular course that I know of. We just hope you've caught on by osmosis.

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool. So you have to be very careful about that. After you've not fooled yourself, it's easy not to fool other scientists. You just have to be honest in a conventional way after that.

I would like to add something that's not essential to the science, but something I kind of believe, which is that you should not fool the layman when you're talking as a scientist. I'm not trying to tell you what to do about cheating on your wife, or fooling your girlfriend, or something like that, when you're not trying to be a scientist, but just trying to be an ordinary human being. We'll leave those problems up to you and your rabbi. I'm talking about a specific, extra type of integrity that is not lying, but bending over backwards to show how you're maybe wrong, that you ought to do when acting as a scientist. And this is our responsibility as scientists, certainly to other scientists, and I think to laymen.

For example, I was a little surprised when I was talking to a friend who was going to go on the radio. He does work on cosmology and astronomy, and he wondered how he would explain what the applications of this work were. "Well," I said, "there aren't any." He said, "Yes, but then we won't get support for more research of this kind." I think that's kind of dishonest. If you're representing yourself as a scientist, then you should explain to the layman what you're doing—and if they don't want to support you under those circumstances, then that's their decision.

One example of the principle is this: If you've made up your mind to test a theory, or you want to explain some idea, you should always decide to publish it whichever way it comes out. If we only publish results of a certain kind, we can make the argument look good. We must publish *both* kinds of result. For example—let's take advertising again—suppose some particular cigarette has some particular property, like low nicotine. It's published widely by the company that this means it is good for you—they don't say, for instance, that the tars are a different proportion, or that something else is the matter with the cigarette. In other words, publication probability depends upon the answer. That should not be done.

I say that's also important in giving certain types of government advice. Supposing a senator asked you for advice about whether drilling a hole should be done in his state; and you decide it would be better in some other state. If you don't publish such a result, it seems to me you're not giving scientific advice. You're being used. If your answer happens to come out in the direction the government or the politicians like, they can use it as an argument in their favor; if it comes out the other way, they don't publish it at all. That's not giving scientific advice.

Other kinds of errors are more characteristic of poor science. When I was at Cornell. I often talked to the people in the psychology department. One of the students told me she wanted to do an experiment that went something like this—I don't remember it in detail, but it had been found by others that under certain circumstances, X, rats did something, A. She was curious as to whether, if she changed the circumstances to Y, they would still do, A. So her proposal was to do the experiment under circumstances Y and see if they still did A.

I explained to her that it was necessary first to repeat in her laboratory the experiment of the other person—to do it under condition X to see if she could also get result A—and then change to Y and see if A changed. Then she would know that the real difference was the thing she thought she had under control.

She was very delighted with this new idea, and went to her professor. And his reply was, no, you cannot do that, because the experiment has already been done and you would be wasting time. This was in about 1935 or so, and it seems to have been the general policy then to not try to repeat psychological experiments, but only to change the conditions and see what happens.

Nowadays there's a certain danger of the same thing happening, even in the famous field of physics. I was shocked to hear of an experiment done at the big accelerator at the National Accelerator Laboratory, where a person used deuterium. In order to compare his heavy hydrogen results to what might happen to light hydrogen he had to use data from someone else's experiment on light hydrogen, which was done on different apparatus. When asked he said it was because he couldn't get time on the program (because there's so little time and it's such expensive apparatus) to do the experiment with light hydrogen on this apparatus because there wouldn't be any new result. And so the men in charge of programs at NAL are so anxious for new results, in order to get more money to keep the thing going for public relations purposes, they are destroying—possibly—the value of the experiments themselves, which is the whole purpose of the thing. It is often hard for the experimenters there to complete their work as their scientific integrity demands.

All experiments in psychology are not of this type, however. For example, there have been many experiments running rats through all kinds of mazes, and so on—with little clear result. But in 1937 a man named Young did a very interesting one. He had a long corridor with doors all along one side where the rats came in, and doors along the other side where the food was. He wanted to see if he could train the rats to go in at the third door down from wherever he started them off. No. The rats went immediately to the door where the food had been the time before.

The question was, how did the rats know, because the corridor was so beautifully built and so uniform, that this was the same door as before? Obviously there was something about the door that was different from the other doors. So he painted the doors very carefully, arranging the textures on the faces of the doors exactly the same. Still the rats could tell. Then he thought maybe the rats were smelling the food, so he used chemicals to change the smell after each run. Still the rats could tell. Then he realized the rats might be able to tell by seeing the lights and the arrangement in the laboratory like any commonsense person. So he covered the corridor, and, still the rats could tell.

He finally found that they could tell by the way the floor sounded when they ran over it. And he could only fix that by putting his corridor in sand. So he covered one after another of all possible clues and finally was able to fool the rats so that they had to learn to go in the third door. If he relaxed any of his conditions, the rats could tell.

Now, from a scientific standpoint, that is an A-Number-1 experiment. That is the experiment that makes rat-running experiments sensible, because it uncovers the clues that the rat is really using—not what you think it's using. And that is the experiment that tells exactly what conditions you have to use in order to be careful and control everything in an experiment with rat-running.

I looked into the subsequent history of this research. The subsequent experiment, and the one after that, never referred to Mr. Young. They never used any of his criteria of putting the corridor on sand, or being very careful. They just went right on running rats in the same old way, and paid no attention to the great discoveries of Mr. Young, and his papers are not referred to, because he didn't discover anything about the rats. In fact, he discovered *all* the things you have to do to discover something about rats. But not paying attention to experiments like that is a characteristic of Cargo Cult Science.

Another example is the ESP experiments of Mr. Rhine, and other people. As various people have made criticisms—and they themselves have made criticisms of their own experiments—they improve the techniques so that the effects are smaller, and smaller, and smaller until they gradually disappear. All the parapsychologists are looking for some experiment that can be repeated—that you can do again and get the same effect—statistically, even. They run a million rats—no, it's people this time—they do a lot of

things and get a certain statistical effect. Next time they try it they don't get it any more. And now you find a man saying that it is an irrelevant demand to expect a repeatable experiment. This is *science*?

This man also speaks about a new institution, in a talk in which he was resigning as Director of the Institute of Parapsychology. And, in telling people what to do next, he says that one of the things they have to do is be sure they only train students who have shown their ability to get PSI results to an acceptable extent—not to waste their time on those ambitious and interested students who get only chance results. It is very dangerous to have such a policy in teaching—to teach students only how to get certain results, rather than how to do an experiment with scientific integrity.

So I wish to you—I have no more time, so I have just one wish for you—the good luck to be somewhere where you are free to maintain the kind of integrity I have described, and where you do not feel forced by a need to maintain your position in the organization, or financial support, or so on, to lose your integrity. May you have that freedom. May I also give you one last bit of advice: Never say that you'll give a talk unless you know clearly what you're going to talk about and more or less what you're going to say.

Noam Chomsky at University of Connecticut

May 16, 1999

There's no really natural transition to the topic I would like to say a few words about, namely the prospects for the brain and cognitive sciences, what is sometimes felt to be the last great mountain range that the natural sciences might hope to scale.

But there is perhaps a certain transition.

A forthcoming paper by one of the leading researchers in cognitive neuroscience, Randy Gallistel, argues - pretty convincingly, I think - that a long tradition of research and speculation is seriously off the mark in its beliefs about general learning processes and associative theories of learning. Rather, throughout zoology and experimental psychology it is increasingly becoming clear that learning mechanisms are computationally specialized behavior for solving particular kinds of problems. That ranges from insect behavior, to shooting the winning basket for the Celtics, to what you and I are doing right now.

Gallistel also points out that this "modular view of learning" is "the norm these days in neuroscience." According to this view, in all animals learning is based on specialized mechanisms, "instincts to learn" in specific ways. These "learning mechanisms" can be regarded as "organs within the brain [that] are neural circuits whose structure enables them to perform one particular kind of computation."

They do that reflexively, unless the environment is "extremely hostile." Human language acquisition is instinctive in this sense, based on a specialized "language organ," which grows from an initial state that is an expression to the genes through various stages until it reaches a mature state that corresponds more or less to what we informally call "a language"; say, some variety of English.

And this transition does appear to take place as a virtual reflex, apart from "extremely hostile environments." It seems that normal knowledge of language can be closely approximated even by the deaf-blind, using only the extremely rudimentary information that is provided by placing a hand on the face of a person who is speaking, though the full story is somewhat more complex.

These are the specific topics of cognitive psychology that have been of particular interest to me for many years. I think the work of the past half century, including groundbreaking work that has been done right here, quite strongly supports the general thesis that Gallistel takes to be the norm in neuroscience: the circulatory system, the digestive system, the kidney, the visual systems, and so on.

These are often called "organs of the body," but of course not with the implication that they can be removed leaving the rest intact. Rather, these are subsystems of a complex whole, with their own specialized properties, interacting in specific ways - organs in a useful but somewhat abstract sense. There seems every reason to believe that the human brain is structured along similar lines.

Gallistel also sounds a useful warning note: he points out that "We clearly do not understand how the nervous system computes," even "how it carries out the small set of arithmetic and logical operations that are fundamental to any computation." A great deal has been learned about several of the organs that enter into human thought and action, notably the language organ.

But enormous gaps of understanding remain. One of them is the gap between theories of the nature, growth, and use of the organ, and theories of the anatomy and psychology of the brain. It is for such reasons that the organs that enter into thought and action are often called "mental organs," to signal that the problem of unification of mental aspects of the world and other aspects, in this case, we presume, cellular aspects.

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As Gallistel notes, the problem arises for all psychological processes. It shows up in many ways. Thus, a great deal has been learned about vision in recent years, but as another prominent neuroscientist recently pointed out, the ability to recognize "a continuous vertical line is a mystery that neurology has not yet solved." The word "yet" should sound another warning note: no one can guess what might be necessary even for this problem to be solved, let alone what changes in basic science might be required to relate mental aspects of the world to others.

Many leading figures in the brain and cognitive sciences are optimistic about the prospects, but not without recognizing the gaps that remain - "chasms" might be a better word. One of the grand old men of the field, Vernon Mountcastle, who is one of the optimists, observes that the study of higher mental faculties raises a serious question about the validity of "the long-standing dogma of neuroscience conserved in mammalian evolution."

The dogma may not be "universally true," he suggests, "especially if it applies to the human brain," which appears to have neuron types that differ from those of other mammals in biochemical mechanisms and patterns of connectivity. Still more seriously, we do not even know if these are the right mechanisms and patterns to explore in seeking to achieve unification of mental and cellular theories of the world.

It is generally assumed that the human species reached essentially its current state about 100,000 years ago, after very radical changes in the preceding several million years. These developments included a tripling of brain size and a great many structural changes long after the separation from the nearest surviving relatives, roughly 5 million years ago, which means a separation of twice that length in evolutionary terms. It is also assumed that whatever happened about 100,000 years ago probably involved the appearance of a language organ, and with it, presumably, many of the other distinctive properties of our curious species.

That's a flick of an eye in evolutionary terms.

Also intriguing is the apparent biological isolation of the human language faculty. Perhaps the closest analogues are in insects - the famous dance of the honeybees. But there is a good deal of controversy about the nature and function of these systems, the analogies at best are very weak, and there is of course no evolutionary relation.

The basic facts were observed by Darwin, who noted the radical distinction between human language and all known animal systems of communication. Human language, he pointed out, is infinite in its capacity for expression of thought, while other animals crucially lack that property, and as we now know, many other elementary properties of human language as well. The observation is in fact far older: it was noted by Galileo, and became a central part of the great scientific revolution of the 17th century - and that included the first great "cognitive revolution," perhaps the only one that really merits the term.

The 17th century scientific revolution reached its highest peak in the achievements of Isaac Newton. It is commonly held that Newton showed that the universe is an intricate mechanism, rather like the complex automata that captured the imagination of 17th-18th century thinkers, much as computers do today. But in fact what Newton demonstrated was exactly the opposite. Newton showed, much to his dismay, that the universe is not a mechanical device.

To quote a leading modern historian of physics, Newton showed that "a purely materialistic or mechanistic physics is impossible," that it is necessary to introduce into core natural science "incomprehensible and inexplicable facts" (Alexander Koyre).

Newton regarded his own conclusions as an "absurdity," and spent the rest of his life trying to find some escape, as did many other leading scientists, in fact for centuries. But in vain.

It is common these days to ridicule those who still believe in the ghost in the machine. But that criticism mistakes the problem. Newton exorcised the machine; he left the ghost intact. The fact was understood by leading figures. 250 years ago David Hume recognized that "Newton seemed to draw off the veil from some of the mysteries of nature," but "he shewed at the same time the imperfections of the mechanical philosophy; and thereby restored [Nature's] ultimate secrets to that obscurity in which they ever did and ever will remain." The world is simply not comprehensible to human intelligence, at least in the ways that modern science had hoped and expected.

The classic scholarly study of the history of materialism describes Newton's achievements as the destruction of materialism or physicalism, in any serious sense of the terms. It reviews how the expectations and goals of the pioneers of the scientific revolution, and their materialist predecessors, were abandoned, and we gradually "accustomed ourselves to the abstract notion of forces, or rather to a notion hovering in a mystic obscurity between abstraction and concrete comprehension," a "turning-point" in the history of materialism that removes the doctrine far from those of the "genuine Materialists" of the 17th century and before, and deprives it of much significance. These facts have considerable bearing on the study of mind and brain today. In the light of Newton's demolition of the concept of matter, many scientists came to recognize that John Locke must have been correct in suggesting that, just as the world has properties of attraction and repulsion and others that "we can in no way conceive motion bale to produce," so "a faculty of thinking" might have been "superadded" to matter.

The term "matter" by then had lost any significance, referring merely to the world, with whatever strange properties it has, including Newtonian "absurdities" and more extreme ones that had to be accepted as true in later years.

By the end of the 18th century, Locke's tentative suggestion was appropriately rephrased by the famous chemist Joseph Priestley as a virtual truism: "the powers of sensation or perception and thought" are properties of "a certain organized system of matter"; properties "termed mental" are the result [of the] organical structure" of the brain and "the human nervous system" generally.

Priestley of course had no idea how these properties arise from the nervous system. Rather, much like the properties of attraction, repulsion, chemical affinity, light, electricity and magnetism, and others, mental properties had to be postulated on the basis of experimental evidence, perhaps with the eventual hope of unification, but without any prior idea of the form that such unification might take.

Today, that traditional and virtually inevitable conclusion has been revived, now formulated as a major thesis that "Things mental, indeed minds, are emergent properties of brains," though "we do not yet understand" the principles that relate these emergent properties to those of cells. The word "yet" again reflects the prevailing optimism. But whatever speculations one may have about the prospects, the thesis is not new; it is a traditional one, a direct consequence of Newton's exorcism of the machine.

The history of chemistry provides revealing lessons for the study of mental aspects of the world, and the course it might take. Chemistry, of course, is hard science; right next door to core physics in the rather misleading standard hierarchy of "reducibility."

By the mid-18th century it was understood that "chemical affinity must be accepted as a first principle, which we cannot explain any more than Newton could explain gravitation, and let us defer accounting for

the laws of affinity until we have established such a body of doctrine as Newton has established concerning the laws of gravitation" (English chemist Joseph Black).

That is pretty much what happened. Chemistry proceeded to establish a rich body of doctrine," its triumphs... Built on no reductionist foundation but rather achieved in isolation from the newly emerging science of physics" (a leading contemporary historian of chemistry, Arnold Thackrey). That continued until very recently.

What was finally achieved 60 years ago, by Linus Pauling, was not reduction: rather, unification, something very different. A few years earlier, in 1929, Bertrand Russell, who knew the sciences well, observed that chemical laws "cannot at present be reduced to physical laws." But his phrase "cannot at present" was shown to be wrong. It turned out that chemical laws cannot in principle be reduced to physical laws, as physical laws were understood.

Physics had to undergo fundamental changes, mainly in the 1920s, in order to be unified with basic chemistry. Physics had to "free itself" from "intuitive pictures" and give up the hope of "visualizing the world," as Heisenberg put it, another long leap away from intelligibility in the sense of the scientific revolution of the 17th century.

As recently as 70 years ago, before the unification was achieved, chemistry was regarded by many prominent scientists as a calculating device, a way of organizing and predicting the results of experiments, without any reality, because it had not been reduced to core physics. The topic was hotly debated, in terms that are very similar to those that dominate much of contemporary thinking and debate in cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind.

By the 1930s, it was understood that the debate had been pointless, that chemistry was real in the only sense of "reality" we have: it was the best theory that could be constructed to understand chemical aspects of the world. These quite recent developments in the core natural sciences should, I think, be taken seriously in considering higher mental faculties and the "bodies of doctrine" that are being developed concerning them, language in particular.

The unification of biology and chemistry a few years after Pauling's discovery can be misleading. That was genuine reduction, but to a newly created physical chemistry; some of the same people were involved, notably Pauling himself. True reduction is not so common in the history of science, and need not be assumed automatically to be a model for what will happen in the future.

The study of human higher mental faculties might well follow the course of the investigation of mechanical, electromagnetic, optical, and chemical aspects of world, among others. The hope for reduction may once again prove illusory.

One cannot know, until we know, how unification might take place - if it ever does - and what form it will take; perhaps, once again, a radical reconstruction of what is misleadingly called "the more basic" science. Perhaps novel biochemical mechanisms and patterns of connectivity are involved, as Mountcastle suggests. Or perhaps more radical revisions, as often in the past.

In the last half century there has been intensive and often highly productive inquiry into the brain, behavior, and cognitive faculties of many organisms. The Holy Grail, of course, is human higher mental faculties. But it should be clear that this is the goal that is likely to be the most remote, probably by orders of magnitude, if only because of the complexity of the systems and their apparently novelty and biological isolation.

Another serious barrier to inquiry is that direct experimentation is excluded on ethical grounds - today, I should add; not long ago practices were quite different, in ways that we would now find extremely shocking. A lot is known about the human visual system, but that is because it is assumed to be rather like those of other mammals, including other primates.

And for these animals, we permit ourselves invasive experimentation, raising animals in controlled environments, and so on. From such experimentation, a great deal is learned, and the basic conclusions are reasonably to hold for the human visual system as well.

But we know of no analogues to language and other human mental organs, we would presumably bar direct experimentation as we do for humans. There is hope that new non-invasive technologies - brain-imaging techniques and others - may offer a way around this barrier to understanding. The prospects are exciting, and a lot has already been learned.

But despite much important progress in many areas, and justified excitement about the prospects opened by newer technologies, I think it is wise to be cautious in assessing what we know and what we might realistically hope to learn.

For the present, the study of language and other higher human mental faculties is proceeding much as chemistry did, seeking to "establish a rich body of doctrine," and sometimes succeeding, with an eye to eventual unification, but without any clear idea of how this might take place. Some of these bodies of doctrine are rather surprising in their implications.

Thus in the case of language, very recent work, some of the most important of it conducted here, is providing interesting grounds for taking seriously an idea that a few years ago would have seemed outlandish: that the language organ of the brain approaches a kind of optimal design, that it is in some interesting sense an optimal solution to the minimum design specifications the language organ must meet to be usable at all.

That is not what one expects to find in a highly complex biological organ. At the very simplest level, say cell division, or the structure of viruses, conclusions of this sort seem very reasonable, and even partially understood.

But it has been commonly assumed that evolution is a "tinkerer," in the phrase of Nobel Laureate Francois Jacob, doing the best it can with the materials at hand, the best typically being human existence in fact does approach optimal design, that would suggest that in some unknown way, it may be the result of the functioning of physical and chemical laws for a brain that has reached a certain level of complexity. And further questions arise for general evolution that are by no means novel, but that have been somewhat at the margins of inquiry until fairly recently.

I'm thinking of the work of D'Arcy Thompson and Alan Turing, to mention two of the most prominent figures.

Perhaps I might add one final remark about the limits of understanding. Many of the questions that inspired the modern scientific revolution are not even on the agenda. These include issues of will and choice, which were taken to be the core of the mindbody problem - the problem that was undermined by Newton, when he showed that there were no bodies in any meaningful sense.

There has been very valuable work about how an organism executes a plan for some integrated motor action - how a cockroach walks, or a person reaches for a cup on the table. But no one even raises the question of why this plan is executed rather than some other one, apart from the very simplest organisms.

Much the same is true even for visual perception, sometimes considered to be a passive or reflexive operation.

Recently two MIT cognitive neuroscientists published a review of progress in solving a problem posed in 1850 by Helmholtz: "Even without moving our eyes, we can focus our attention on different objects at will, resulting in very different perceptual experiences of the same visual field."

The phrase "at will" points to an area beyond serious empirical inquiry. It remains as much of a mystery as it was for Newton at the end of his life, when he was still seeking some "subtle spirit" that lies hidden in all bodies and that might, without "absurdity," account for their properties of attraction and repulsion, the nature and effects of light, sensation, and the way "member of animal bodies move at the command of the will" - all comparable mysteries for Newton. In the 17th century, the ordinary use of language was taken to be the prime illustration of this mystery, and the best proof of the existence of other minds. And for reasons we should not lightly dismiss.

For some of these mysteries, extraordinary bodies of doctrine have been developed in the past several hundred years, some of the greatest achievements of the human intellect. And there have been remarkable feats of unification as well. How remote the remaining mountain peaks may be, and even just where they are, we can only guess.

Within the range of feasible inquiry, there is plenty of work to be done in understanding mental aspects of the world, including human language. And the prospects are surely exciting. We would do well, however, to keep in some corner of our minds David Humes' conclusion about "Nature's ultimate secrets" and the "obscurity in which they ever did and ever will remain and particularly the reasoning that led him to that judgement, and its confirmation in the subsequent history of the hard sciences.

These are matters that are sometimes too easily forgotten, I suspect, and that merit serious reflection - possibly, some day, even constructive scientific inquiry.

Thank you.

Peter Norvig at University of California, Berkeley

May 21, 2006

Congratulations, graduates.

Let me start with a story. Two new researchers on my team at Google decided, for their starter project, to look at the way ads are matched to search queries. They discovered an improvement that results in about a 1% increase in revenue. Now the question is: is this a boring development -- after all, what could be more routine than improving an existing system by 1% -- or an exciting one: making progress on something that a lot of smart people had already thought hard about, and incidentally bringing in an additional \$100M a year in revenue to the company, and many times that value to the advertisers and consumers. And some larger questions: how many of these improvements do we need to keep our society moving forward, and what should be the mix of incremental 1% improvements versus revolutionary, 100% new ideas?

One way to look at it is that the World Gross Domestic Product is \$60 trillion/yr, but let's concentrate on the US GDP, which is \$12 trillion/yr (or \$42,000 per person). Except for a dip in the 1930's during the great depression, it has grown at a remarkably constant pace, doubling every 20 years. Now, there are about 3.5 million scientists and engineers in the US work force, of which computer scientists have the largest chunk. If we take it upon ourselves as scientists and engineers to deliver all of the doubling in the GDP, that works out to an increase of \$3.4M/yr that each of us needs to deliver in the next 20 years.

I should say that this model is highly simplified. As much as I respect computer scientists and engineers, we don't actually deliver all the increases. Just this month there was a Scientific American article that says insects produce \$57B/yr in free labor. Yet despite this, insects are rarely chosen as commencement speakers, so I'll exercise my chauvinistic prerogative and stick to us humans.

When doing back-of-the-envelope calculations, it is always a good idea to verify them with a second approach. Another way to look at the problem is to count scientific disciplines and figure out how much of each discipline we 3.5M scientists will have to handle. So I looked at the Dewey Decimal System. The 600s are technology. There are some substantial disciplines like 610: Medical Sciences, but there are some less extensive ones like 682: blacksmithing and 664: food technology, along with 663: beverage technology. I count about a dozen substantial disciplines. How substantial? Well the ACM categorization lists 857 subcategories within computer science. For example, my favorite category, Information Search and Retrieval, has the 5 subcategories Clustering, Query formulation, Retrieval models, Search process, and Selection process. (They don't mention ads matching.) A dozen times 857 is about 10,000 subcategories across all of technology. So on average, each of these 10,000 subcategories gets 350 scientists and engineers to work on it, and each such team needs to bring in an additional \$1.2B/yr in the next twenty years.

Now let's go back to the two Google researchers from my first story. The two of them had the original idea, but three others helped implement it. According to my model, it takes 29 people to generate a \$100M increase, so that means if we want to maintain the average, the team of 5, along with 24 of you in the audience, can take the rest of the next 20 years off. But of course we don't want to be just average. We want to excel; we're from Berkeley! How can we excel?

Before I answer that, let me return for the moment to Dewey Decimal 663: beverage technology. It turns out that in my very first professional job, as an intern thirty years ago, I had a colleague, a chemist, who had worked in beverage technology. The summer before he had been an intern and was given the task of figuring out if there was a particular chemical that gave whisky the distinctive taste of being aged in an

oak cask. The company figured if they could isolate the chemical maybe they could just mix it in, and skip five or ten years of aging. So my friend went into the lab and isolated what he thought might be the right compound. He ordered a small vial from a chemical supply company (remember, this was before online shopping and email, so they had to actually write words on paper) and mixed up a batch. It tasted pretty good. (Why can't we computer scientists get research projects that involve consuming alcohol?) My friend was duly congratulated, and he wrote to the chemical supply company and asked for a 55 gallon drum of the stuff. They wrote back, saying "we regret that we can not fill your order because we are currently low on stock and, as I'm sure you know, to produce this chemical we need to age it in oak casks for five years."

The point of this story is that if it had happened today, my friend would not have had to spend months in the lab; he could have spent minutes on Google instead. I searched for about three minutes and I'm not sure exactly what chemical he isolated, but I do know that there is a small body of literature on volatile oak extractives that would help me find out, if only I understood a little more chemistry. Furthermore, I was able to do this because of the many efforts of the computer scientists working in category H.3.3: Information Search and Retrieval, some of them making incremental 1% improvements, some making larger leaps, but not one of them, I'm quite certain, thinking that their work would one day be applicable to a 30-year old problem in Dewey Decimal category 663: beverage technology.

So my advice to you is to pick one of the 10,000 categories, or invent category number 10,001, and make some progress in it. Pick problems that are ambitious enough that your expected value over the next 20 years is at least your \$3.4M/yr share. But worry about the value you produce, not just the money. America's first great scientist, Ben Franklin, said "we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours". So be happy and productive, don't be evil, and be glad of an opportunity to serve others.

Edward O. Wilson at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

May 8, 2011

As your commencement speaker, I will be brief. I'm not going to be as brief as Salvador Dali, who once gave the world's shortest speech – six seconds in duration. He said, "I will be so brief I have already finished," and he sat down. There was the perfect commencement speaker, but I'm not and I will be reasonably brief, nonetheless, I promise.

And to the point. I'm going to seize this opportunity to describe the world in a way you may not have often heard it expressed, even at this great University, and certainly not widely, even at our best universities. It is that the 21st Century is going to be the Century of the Environment worldwide, and in science it is going to be the Century of Biology. The reason is simply that this is the time we either will settle down as a species or completely wreck the planet.

We will have to evolve a better world order than the one we have now, which I like to call our Star Wars Civilization. I mean we have stone-age emotions, medieval institutions and godlike technology. In the case of emotions, they evolved in pre-history over millions of years. In the case of our institutions, especially within religions and ideology, we are in constant conflict. And in the case of our technology, we are seeing things going almost beyond the control of our imagination. These three stanchions of current civilization explain why we are constantly in trouble. They are dangerous. They are very serious problems for the rest of life and, ultimately, for ourselves. And today we are still far from even at the margin of solutions.

At the base of the problem, I would like to suggest, are the three still mostly unanswered fundamental questions of religion, philosophy and science. They are: *Where do we come from?*, *What are we?*, and *Where are we going?* You graduates have dealt with aspects of these questions, the great riddle, here at this university, in parts and pieces, but everywhere our best thinkers are confounded by them. It is still the case, as the French writer Jean Bruller put it during the dark days of the 1930s. He said, for then as well as for today, "All of mankind's problems are due to the fact that we do not know what we are and cannot agree on what we wish to become."

In one area in particular, the environment, humanity urgently has to decide what we are, what we wish to become, and where we are going. And that is especially true for the way we relate ourselves to the rest of life. And we better do it soon.

The world is fortunately beginning to turn green, at least pastel green. But I'd like to call your attention to an imbalance in the way we are turning green. The emphasis today is on the physical environment, that is, on climate change, pollution, the decline of fresh water and arable land, and the depletion of irreplaceable natural resources. And it's well and good that we focus on these matters.

But there has been proportionately much less attention paid to the living environment, and especially the diversity of life – biodiversity – which is the totality of the ecosystems, such as ponds, rivers, forests patches, and coral reefs; and then the species of plants, animals, and microorganisms that compose each of these ecosystems; and then the genes that prescribe the traits of the species that compose the ecosystems – all are at peril.

That great hierarchy and resource has taken three-and-a half billion years to emerge. Our lives depend upon it, because we are, first and above all things, a biological species living in a very special biological world. Our relation to it can be put in a nutshell as follows. Scientists have found the biosphere, that razor-thin membrane plastered onto the surface of the earth, to be richer than ever before conceived. But

due to human activity it is being eroded away at an accelerating rate. We estimate, those of us who measure such things, that the rate of species extinction is now about a thousand times higher than before humanity entered the scene, and furthermore if it is left unabated, half the species on Earth will be gone or on the edge of extinction by the end of the century.

That loss of so much of the rest of life, if allowed to continue, is going to inflict a heavy price on you and future generations in wealth, security, and spirit. If on the other hand, the problem is solved, the benefits in wealth, security, and spirit will become beyond measure.

So the torch is passed to you here. Please take the torch of this fundamental problem and the opportunity it provides to understand and to contribute to its solution.

And now finally a piece of personal advice. This university, one of the best in America, has given you the means to be flexible, to look ahead and that capacity, with determination and hard work, means you will lead a fulfilling and honorable life. If you are planning on graduate studies and they feel right, then good for you. If you opted out of advanced studies, but think that it *might* have been right, consider trying it and find out. We need as many determined, highly educated citizens in this faltering country of ours as we can get.

At Harvard I advised students for decades on these matters and here is what I've said to those in particular who were planning to go, as undergraduates, into medical and law schools, but were still a little shaky about the whole thing.

There is an enormous, built-in, professional flexibility in an M.D. In addition to the large array of specializations and general practice within those, there is public health, there is hospital and medical institute administration, and then there is the vast and very rewarding world of medical research. For the graduate in law and those going into the law school, there are endless avenues open for practice and application, in business, in public service, in public and private administration in a wide diversity of venues.

And for you graduates in science, technology, and education, the 21st Century is indeed one to make a huge individual contribution.

And for all of you, for whatever future you have in mind, the future and changes are becoming radically new and different at warp speed. Ours is above and beyond all an exponential world, changing faster than at any previous period of history. We are now in the early period of an overwhelmingly techno-scientific civilization, connected literally person to person. The accumulated knowledge of the world is already at the zettabyte level – that's a one followed by 21 zeroes of bytes. It is growing faster and faster by the digital revolution in communication, which is changing everything – all that we know, all that we need to quickly learn, all that we need to understand in order to survive as a species.

The trajectory of history can only be dimly foreseen. It will consist of shocks and surprises. This country and the rest of the world needs university-trained young people prepared not only by knowledge itself but by the capacity to find new knowledge in order to respond quickly to unexpected needs and crises, challenging all the various professions, also in public affairs, and in simple, everyday life. And, with it all, to think upon and understand the meaning of humanity and yourselves and your lives. So, go forth. Think. Save the world.

But for now, congratulations to you and to your wonderful, justly proud, and much relieved parents. And thank y'all for having me with you and, as a son of Alabama, to become an honorary Tar Heel.

The Writers

Joseph Brodsky – 1988 – University of Michigan

Bill Watterson – 1990 – Kenyon College

Toni Morrison – 2004 – Wellesley College

David Foster Wallace – 2005 – Kenyon College

Parker Palmer – 2015 – Naropa University

If you know of any commencement speeches you think I'd like or have any thoughts on categories I've missed, please email at kevin@12mv2.com with the subject "Commencement Speeches you may like." Thank you!

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Joseph Brodsky at University of Michigan

December 18, 1988

Some Tips

The Winter Commencement Address delivered to 2,000 University of Michigan graduates, their families and friends, December 18, 1988.

Life is a game with many rules but no referee. One learns how to play it more by watching it than by consulting any book, including the Holy Book. Small wonder, then, that so many play dirty, that so few win, that so many lose.

At any rate, if this place is The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, that I remember, it's fairly safe for me to assume that you, its graduates, are even less familiar with the Good Book than those who sat in these benches, let's say, 16 years ago, when I ventured afield here for the first time.

To my eye, ear, and nostril, this place looks like Ann Arbor, it goes blue—or feels blue—like Ann Arbor; it smells like Ann Arbor (though I must admit that there is less marijuana in the air now than there used to be, and that causes momentary confusion for an old Ann Arbor hand). It seems to be, then, Ann Arbor, where I spent a part of my life—the best part for all I know—and where, 16 years ago, your predecessors knew next to nothing about the Bible.

If I remember my colleagues well, if I know what's happening to university curricula all over the country, if I am not totally oblivious to the pressures the so-called modern world exerts upon the young, I feel nostalgic for those who sat in your chairs a dozen or so years ago, because some of them at least could cite the Ten Commandments and still others even remembered the names of the Seven Deadly Sins. As to what they've done with that precious knowledge of theirs afterward, as to how they fared in the game, I have no idea. All I can hope for is that in the long run one is better off being guided by rules and taboos laid down by someone totally impalpable than by the penal code alone.

Since your run is most likely to be fairly long, and since being better off and having a decent world around you is what you presumably are after, you could do worse than to acquaint yourselves with those commandments and that list of sins. There are just 17 items altogether, and some of those overlap. Of course, you may argue that they belong to a creed with a substantial record of violence. Still, as creeds go, this one appears to be the most tolerant; it's worth your consideration if only because it gave birth to the society in which you have the right to question or negate its value.

But I am not here to extol the virtues of any particular creed or philosophy, nor do I relish, as so many seem to, the opportunity to snipe at the modern system of education or at you, its alleged victims. To begin with, I don't perceive you as such. After all, in certain fields your knowledge is immeasurably superior to mine or anyone's of my generation. I regard you as a bunch of young, reasonably egotistical souls on the eve of a very long journey. I shudder to contemplate its length, and I ask myself in what way I could possibly be of use to you. Do I know something about life that could be of help or consequence to you, and if I do, is there a way to pass this information on to you?

The answer to the first question is, I suppose, yes — not so much because a person of my age is entitled to out-fox any of you at existential chess as because he is, in all probability, tired of quite a lot of the stuff you are still aspiring to. (This fatigue alone is something the young should be advised on as an attendant feature of both their eventual success and their failure; this sort of knowledge may enhance their savoring of the former as well as a better weathering of the latter.) As for the second question, I truly wonder. The

example of the aforementioned commandments may discourage any commencement speaker, for the Ten Commandments themselves were a commencement address—literally so, I must say. But there is a transparent wall between the generations, an ironic curtain, if you will, a see-through veil allowing almost no passage of experience. At best, some tips.

Regard then, what you are about to hear as just tips—of several icebergs, if I may say so, not of Mount Sinai. I am no Moses, nor are you biblical Jews; these are a few random jottings scribbled on a yellow pad somewhere in California -- not tablets. Ignore them if you wish, doubt them if you must, forget them if you can't help it; there is nothing imperative about them. Should some of it now or in the time to be come in handy to you, I'll be glad. If not, my wrath won't reach you.

(1) Now and in the time to be, I think it will pay for you to zero in on being precise with your language. Try to build and treat your vocabulary the way you are to treat your checking account. Pay every attention to it and try to increase your earnings. The purpose here is not to boost your bedroom eloquence or your professional success — although those, too, can be consequences — nor is it to turn you into parlor sophisticates. The purpose is to enable you to articulate yourselves as fully and precisely as possible; in a word, the purpose is your balance. For the accumulation of things not spelled out, not properly articulated, may result in neurosis. On a daily basis, a lot is happening to one's psyche; the mode of one's expression, however, often remains the same. Articulation lags behind experience. That doesn't go well with the psyche. Sentiments, nuances, thoughts, perceptions that remain nameless, unable to be voiced and dissatisfied with approximations, get pent up within an individual and may lead to a psychological explosion or implosion. To avoid that, one needn't turn into a bookworm. One should simply acquire a dictionary and read it on the same daily basis — and, on and off, with books of poetry. Dictionaries, however, are of primary importance. There are a lot of them around; some of them even come with a magnifying glass. They are reasonably cheap, but even the most expensive among them (those equipped with a magnifying glass) cost far less than a single visit to a psychiatrist. If you are going to visit one nevertheless, go with the symptoms of a dictionary junkie.

(2) Now and in the time to be, try to be kind to your parents. If this sounds too close to “Honor thy mother and father” for your comfort, so be it. All I am trying to say is try not to rebel against them, for, in all likelihood, they will die before you do, so you can spare yourselves at least this source of guilt if not of grief. If you must rebel, rebel against those who are not so easily hurt. Parents are too close a target (so, by the way, are sisters, brothers, wives or husbands); the range is such that you can't miss. Rebellion against one's parents, for all its I-won't-take-a-single-penny-from-you, is essentially an extremely bourgeois sort of thing, because it provides the rebel with the ultimate in comfort, in this case, mental comfort: the comfort of one's convictions. The later you hit this pattern, the later you become a mental bourgeois, i.e., the longer you stay skeptical, doubtful, intellectually uncomfortable, the better it is for you.

On the other hand, of course, this not-a-single-penny business makes practical sense, because your parents, in all likelihood, will bequeath all they've got to you, and the successful rebel will end up with the entire fortune intact — in other words, rebellion is a very efficient form of savings. The interest, though, is crippling; I'd say, bankrupting.

(3) Try not to set too much store by politicians — not so much because they are dumb or dishonest, which is more often than not the case, but because of the size of their job, which is too big even for the best among them, by this or that political party, doctrine, system or a blueprint thereof. All they or those can do, at best, is to diminish a social evil, not eradicate it. No matter how substantial an improvement may be, ethically speaking it will always be negligible, because there will always be those — say, just one

person — who won't profit from this improvement. The world is not perfect; the Golden Age never was or will be. The only thing that's going to happen to the world is that it will get bigger, i.e., more populated while not growing in size. No matter how fairly the man you've elected will promise to cut the pie, it won't grow in size; as a matter of fact, the portions are bound to get smaller. In light of that, or, rather, in dark of that — you ought to rely on your own home cooking, that is, on managing the world yourselves — at least that part of it that lies within your reach, within your radius. Yet in doing this, you must also prepare yourselves for the heart-rending realization that even that pie of yours won't suffice; you must prepare yourselves that you're likely to dine as much in disappointment as in gratitude. The most difficult lesson to learn here is to be steady in the kitchen, since by serving this pie just once you create quite a lot of expectations. Ask yourself whether you can afford a steady supply of those pies, or would you rather bargain on a politician? Whatever the outcome of this soul-searching may be — however much you think the world can bet on your baking — you might start right away by insisting that those corporations, banks, schools, labs and whatnot where you'll be working, and whose premises are heated and policed round the clock anyway, permit the homeless in for the night, now that it's winter.

(4) Try not to stand out, try to be modest. There are too many of us as it is, and there are going to be many more, very soon. Thus climbing into the limelight is bound to be one at the expense of the others who won't be climbing. That you must step on somebody's toes doesn't mean you should stand on their shoulders. Besides, all you will see from that vantage point is the human sea, plus those who, like you, have assumed a similarly conspicuous — and precarious at that — position: those who are called rich and famous. On the whole, there is always something faintly unpalatable about being better off than one's likes, and when those likes come in billions, it is more so. To this it should be added that the rich and famous these days, too, come in throngs, that up there on the top it's very crowded. So if you want to get rich or famous or both, by all means go ahead, but don't make a meal of it. To covet what somebody else has is to forfeit your uniqueness; on the other hand, of course, it stimulates mass production. But as you are running through life only once, it is only sensible to try to avoid the most obvious clichés, limited editions included. The notion of exclusivity, mind you, also forfeits your uniqueness, not to mention that it shrinks your sense of reality to the already-achieved. Far better than belonging to any club is to be jostled by the multitudes of those who, given their income and their appearance, represent — at least theoretically — unlimited potential. Try to be more like them than like those who are not like them; try to wear gray. Mimicry is the defense of individuality, not its surrender. I would advise you to lower your voice, too, but I am afraid you will think I am going too far. Still, keep in mind that there is always somebody next to you, a neighbor. Nobody asks you to love him, but try not to hurt or discomfort him much; try to tread on his toes carefully; and should you come to covet his wife, remember at least that this testifies to the failure of your imagination, to your disbelief in — or ignorance of — reality's unlimited potential. Worse comes to worst, try to remember how far away — from the stars, from the depths of the universe, perhaps from its opposite end — came this request not to do it, as well as this idea of loving your neighbor no less than yourself. Maybe the stars know more about gravity, as well as about loneliness, than you do; coveting eyes that they are.

(5) At all costs try to avoid granting yourself the status of the victim. Of all the parts of your body, be most vigilant over your index finger, for it is blame-thirsty. A pointed finger is a victim's logo — the opposite of the V-sign and a synonym for surrender. No matter how abominable your condition may be, try not to blame anything or anybody: history, the state, superiors, race, parents, the phase of the moon, childhood, toilet training, etc. The menu is vast and tedious, and this vastness and tedium alone should be offensive enough to set one's intelligence against choosing from it. The moment that you place blame somewhere, you undermine your resolve to change anything; it could be argued even that that blame-thirsty finger oscillates as wildly as it does because the resolve was never great enough in the first place.

After all, a victim status is not without its sweetness. It commands compassion, confers distinction, and whole nations and continents bask in the murk of mental discounts advertised as the victim's conscience. There is an entire victim-culture, ranging from private counselors to international loans. The professed goal of this network notwithstanding, its net result is that of lowering one's expectations from the threshold, so that a measly advantage could be perceived or billed as a major breakthrough. Of course, this is therapeutic and, given the scarcity of the world's resources, perhaps even hygienic, so for want of a better identity, one may embrace it — but try to resist it. However abundant and irrefutable is the evidence that you are on the losing side, negate it as long as you have your wits about you, as long as your lips can utter "No." On the whole, try to respect life not only for its amenities but for its hardships, too. They are a part of the game, and what's good about a hardship is that it is not a deception. Whenever you are in trouble, in some scrape, on the verge of despair or in despair, remember: that's life speaking to you in the only language it knows well. In other words, try to be a little masochistic: without a touch of masochism, the meaning of life is not complete. If this is of any help, try to remember that human dignity is an absolute, not a piecemeal notion, that it is inconsistent with special pleading, that it derives its poise from denying the obvious. Should you find this argument a bit on the heady side, think at least that by considering yourself a victim you but enlarge the vacuum of irresponsibility that demons or demagogues love so much to fill, since a paralyzed will is no dainty for angels.

(6) The world you are about to enter and exist in doesn't have a good reputation. It's been better geographically than historically; it's still far more attractive visually than socially. It's not a nice place, as you are soon to find out, and I rather doubt that it will get much nicer by the time you leave it. Still, it's the only world available; no alternative exists, and if one did, there is no guarantee that it would be much better than this one. It is a jungle out there, as well as a desert, a slippery slope, a swamp, etc. — literally — but, what's worse, metaphorically, too. Yet, as Robert Frost has said, "The best way out is always through." He also said, in a different poem, though, that "to be social is to be forgiving." It's with a few remarks about this business of getting through that I would like to close.

Try not to pay attention to those who will try to make life miserable for you. There will be a lot of those — in the official capacity as well as the self-appointed. Suffer them if you can't escape them, but once you have steered clear of them, give them the shortest shrift possible. Above all, try to avoid telling stories about the unjust treatment you received at their hands; avoid it no matter how receptive your audience may be. Tales of this sort extend the existence of your antagonists; most likely they are counting on your being talkative and relating your experience to others. By himself, no individual is worth an exercise in injustice (or for that matter, in justice). The ratio of one-to-one doesn't justify the effort: it's the echo that counts. That's the main principle of any oppressor, whether state-sponsored or autodidact. Therefore, steal, or still, the echo, so that you don't allow an event, however unpleasant or momentous, to claim any more time than it took for it to occur.

What your foes do derives its significance or consequence from the way you react. Therefore, rush through or past them as though they were yellow and not red lights. Don't linger on them mentally or verbally; don't pride yourself on forgiving or forgetting them — worse come to worse, do the forgetting first. This way you'll spare your brain cells a lot of useless agitation; this way, perhaps, you may even save those pigheads from themselves, since the prospect of being forgotten is shorter than that of being forgiven. So flip the channel: you can't put this network out of circulation, but at least you can reduce its ratings. Now, this solution is not likely to please angels, but, then again, it's bound to hurt demons, and for the moment that's all that really matters.

I had better stop there. As I said, I'll be glad if you find what I've said useful. If not, it will show that you are equipped far better for the future than one would expect from people of your age. Which, I suppose is

also a reason for rejoicing—not for apprehension. In either case—well equipped or not—I wish you luck, because what lies ahead is no picnic for the prepared and the unprepared alike, and you'll need luck. Still, I believe you'll manage.

I'm no gypsy; I can't divine your future, but it's pretty obvious to any naked eye that you have a lot going for you. To say, the least, you were born, which is in itself half the battle, and you live in a democracy -- this halfway house between nightmare and utopia -- which throws fewer obstacles in the way of an individual than its alternatives.

Lastly, you've been educated at the University of Michigan, in my view the best school in the nation, if only because 16 years ago it gave a badly needed break to the laziest man on the earth, who, on top of that, spoke practically no English—to yours truly. I taught here for some eight years; the language in the which I address you today I learned here; some of my former colleagues are still on the payroll, others retired, and still others sleep the eternal sleep in the earth of Ann Arbor that now carries you. Clearly this place is of extraordinary sentimental value to me; and so it will become, in a dozen years or so, for you. To that extent, I *can* divine your future; in that respect I know you will manage, or, more precisely, succeed. For, feeling a wave of warmth coming over you in a dozen or so years at the mention of this town's name will indicate that, luck or no luck, as human beings you've succeeded. It's this sort of success I wish to you above all in the years to come. The rest depends on luck and matters less.

Bill Watterson at Kenyon College

May 20, 1990

Some Thoughts on the Real World by One Who Glimpsed It and Fled

I have a recurring dream about Kenyon. In it, I'm walking to the post office on the way to my first class at the start of the school year. Suddenly it occurs to me that I don't have my schedule memorized, and I'm not sure which classes I'm taking, or where exactly I'm supposed to be going.

As I walk up the steps to the postoffice, I realize I don't have my box key, and in fact, I can't remember what my box number is. I'm certain that everyone I know has written me a letter, but I can't get them. I get more flustered and annoyed by the minute. I head back to Middle Path, racking my brains and asking myself, "How many more years until I graduate? ...Wait, didn't I graduate already?? How old AM I?" Then I wake up.

Experience is food for the brain. And four years at Kenyon is a rich meal. I suppose it should be no surprise that your brains will probably burp up Kenyon for a long time. And I think the reason I keep having the dream is because its central image is a metaphor for a good part of life: that is, not knowing where you're going or what you're doing.

I graduated exactly ten years ago. That doesn't give me a great deal of experience to speak from, but I'm emboldened by the fact that I can't remember a bit of MY commencement, and I trust that in half an hour, you won't remember of yours either.

In the middle of my sophomore year at Kenyon, I decided to paint a copy of Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" from the Sistine Chapel on the ceiling of my dorm room. By standing on a chair, I could reach the ceiling, and I taped off a section, made a grid, and started to copy the picture from my art history book. Working with your arm over your head is hard work, so a few of my more ingenious friends rigged up a scaffold for me by stacking two chairs on my bed, and laying the table from the hall lounge across the chairs and over to the top of my closet. By climbing up onto my bed and up the chairs, I could hoist myself onto the table, and lie in relative comfort two feet under my painting. My roommate would then hand up my paints, and I could work for several hours at a stretch.

The picture took me months to do, and in fact, I didn't finish the work until very near the end of the school year. I wasn't much of a painter then, but what the work lacked in color sense and technical flourish, it gained in the incongruity of having a High Renaissance masterpiece in a college dorm that had the unmistakable odor of old beer cans and older laundry.

The painting lent an air of cosmic grandeur to my room, and it seemed to put life into a larger perspective. Those boring, flowery English poets didn't seem quite so important, when right above my head God was transmitting the spark of life to man.

My friends and I liked the finished painting so much in fact, that we decided I should ask permission to do it. As you might expect, the housing director was curious to know why I wanted to paint this elaborate picture on my ceiling a few weeks before school let out. Well, you don't get to be a sophomore at Kenyon without learning how to fabricate ideas you never had, but I guess it was obvious that my idea was being proposed retroactively. It ended up that I was allowed to paint the picture, so long as I painted over it and returned the ceiling to normal at the end of the year. And that's what I did.

Despite the futility of the whole episode, my fondest memories of college are times like these, where things were done out of some inexplicable inner imperative, rather than because the work was demanded.

[More Compilations](#)

Clearly, I never spent as much time or work on any authorized art project, or any poli sci paper, as I spent on this one act of vandalism.

It's surprising how hard we'll work when the work is done just for ourselves. And with all due respect to John Stuart Mill, maybe utilitarianism is overrated. If I've learned one thing from being a cartoonist, it's how important playing is to creativity and happiness. My job is essentially to come up with 365 ideas a year.

If you ever want to find out just how uninteresting you really are, get a job where the quality and frequency of your thoughts determine your livelihood. I've found that the only way I can keep writing every day, year after year, is to let my mind wander into new territories. To do that, I've had to cultivate a kind of mental playfulness.

We're not really taught how to recreate constructively. We need to do more than find diversions; we need to restore and expand ourselves. Our idea of relaxing is all too often to plop down in front of the television set and let its pandering idiocy liquefy our brains. Shutting off the thought process is not rejuvenating; the mind is like a car battery-it recharges by running.

You may be surprised to find how quickly daily routine and the demands of "just getting by: absorb your waking hours. You may be surprised matters of habit rather than thought and inquiry. You may be surprised to find how quickly you start to see your life in terms of other people's expectations rather than issues. You may be surprised to find out how quickly reading a good book sounds like a luxury.

At school, new ideas are thrust at you every day. Out in the world, you'll have to find the inner motivation to search for new ideas on your own. With any luck at all, you'll never need to take an idea and squeeze a punchline out of it, but as bright, creative people, you'll be called upon to generate ideas and solutions all your lives. Letting your mind play is the best way to solve problems.

For me, it's been liberating to put myself in the mind of a fictitious six year-old each day, and rediscover my own curiosity. I've been amazed at how one ideas leads to others if I allow my mind to play and wander. I know a lot about dinosaurs now, and the information has helped me out of quite a few deadlines.

A playful mind is inquisitive, and learning is fun. If you indulge your natural curiosity and retain a sense of fun in new experience, I think you'll find it functions as a sort of shock absorber for the bumpy road ahead.

So, what's it like in the real world? Well, the food is better, but beyond that, I don't recommend it.

I don't look back on my first few years out of school with much affection, and if I could have talked to you six months ago, I'd have encouraged you all to flunk some classes and postpone this moment as long as possible. But now it's too late.

Unfortunately, that was all the advice I really had. When I was sitting where you are, I was one of the lucky few who had a cushy job waiting for me. I'd drawn political cartoons for the Collegian for four years, and the Cincinnati Post had hired me as an editorial cartoonist. All my friends were either dreading the infamous first year of law school, or despondent about their chances of convincing anyone that a history degree had any real application outside of academia.

Boy, was I smug.

As it turned out, my editor instantly regretted his decision to hire me. By the end of the summer, I'd been given notice; by the beginning of winter, I was in an unemployment line; and by the end of my first year away from Kenyon, I was broke and living with my parents again. You can imagine how upset my dad was when he learned that Kenyon doesn't give refunds.

Watching my career explode on the launchpad caused some soul searching. I eventually admitted that I didn't have what it takes to be a good political cartoonist, that is, an interest in politics, and I returned to my first love, comic strips.

For years I got nothing but rejection letters, and I was forced to accept a real job.

A REAL job is a job you hate. I designed car ads and grocery ads in the windowless basement of a convenience store, and I hated every single minute of the 4-1/2 million minutes I worked there. My fellow prisoners at work were basically concerned about how to punch the time clock at the perfect second where they would earn another 20 cents without doing any work for it.

It was incredible: after every break, the entire staff would stand around in the garage where the time clock was, and wait for that last click. And after my used car needed the head gasket replaced twice, I waited in the garage too.

It's funny how at Kenyon, you take for granted that the people around you think about more than the last episode of *Dynasty*. I guess that's what it means to be in an ivory tower.

Anyway, after a few months at this job, I was starved for some life of the mind that, during my lunch break, I used to read those poli sci books that I'd somehow never quite finished when I was here. Some of those books were actually kind of interesting. It was a rude shock to see just how empty and robotic life can be when you don't care about what you're doing, and the only reason you're there is to pay the bills. Thoreau said,

"the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

That's one of those dumb cocktail quotations that will strike fear in your heart as you get older. Actually, I was leading a life of loud desperation.

When it seemed I would be writing about "Midnite Madness Sale-abrations" for the rest of my life, a friend used to console me that cream always rises to the top. I used to think, so do people who throw themselves into the sea.

I tell you all this because it's worth recognizing that there is no such thing as an overnight success. You will do well to cultivate the resources in yourself that bring you happiness outside of success or failure. The truth is, most of us discover where we are headed when we arrive. At that time, we turn around and say, yes, this is obviously where I was going all along. It's a good idea to try to enjoy the scenery on the detours, because you'll probably take a few.

I still haven't drawn the strip as long as it took me to get the job. To endure five years of rejection to get a job requires either a faith in oneself that borders on delusion, or a love of the work. I loved the work. Drawing comic strips for five years without pay drove home the point that the fun of cartooning wasn't in the money; it was in the work. This turned out to be an important realization when my break finally came.

Like many people, I found that what I was chasing wasn't what I caught. I've wanted to be a cartoonist since I was old enough to read cartoons, and I never really thought about cartoons as being a business. It never occurred to me that a comic strip I created would be at the mercy of a bloodsucking corporate

parasite called a syndicate, and that I'd be faced with countless ethical decisions masquerading as simple business decisions.

To make a business decision, you don't need much philosophy; all you need is greed, and maybe a little knowledge of how the game works.

As my comic strip became popular, the pressure to capitalize on that popularity increased to the point where I was spending almost as much time screaming at executives as drawing. Cartoon merchandising is a \$12 billion dollar a year industry and the syndicate understandably wanted a piece of that pie. But the more I thought about what they wanted to do with my creation, the more inconsistent it seemed with the reasons I draw cartoons.

Selling out is usually more a matter of buying in. Sell out, and you're really buying into someone else's system of values, rules and rewards.

The so-called "opportunity" I faced would have meant giving up my individual voice for that of a money-grubbing corporation. It would have meant my purpose in writing was to sell things, not say things. My pride in craft would be sacrificed to the efficiency of mass production and the work of assistants.

Authorship would become committee decision. Creativity would become work for pay. Art would turn into commerce. In short, money was supposed to supply all the meaning I'd need.

What the syndicate wanted to do, in other words, was turn my comic strip into everything calculated, empty and robotic that I hated about my old job. They would turn my characters into television hucksters and T-shirt sloganeers and deprive me of characters that actually expressed my own thoughts.

On those terms, I found the offer easy to refuse. Unfortunately, the syndicate also found my refusal easy to refuse, and we've been fighting for over three years now. Such is American business, I guess, where the desire for obscene profit mutes any discussion of conscience.

You will find your own ethical dilemmas in all parts of your lives, both personal and professional. We all have different desires and needs, but if we don't discover what we want from ourselves and what we stand for, we will live passively and unfulfilled. Sooner or later, we are all asked to compromise ourselves and the things we care about. We define ourselves by our actions. With each decision, we tell ourselves and the world who we are. Think about what you want out of this life, and recognize that there are many kinds of success.

Many of you will be going on to law school, business school, medical school, or other graduate work, and you can expect the kind of starting salary that, with luck, will allow you to pay off your own tuition debts within your own lifetime.

But having an enviable career is one thing, and being a happy person is another.

Creating a life that reflects your values and satisfies your soul is a rare achievement. In a culture that relentlessly promotes avarice and excess as the good life, a person happy doing his own work is usually considered an eccentric, if not a subversive. Ambition is only understood if it's to rise to the top of some imaginary ladder of success. Someone who takes an undemanding job because it affords him the time to pursue other interests and activities is considered a flake. A person who abandons a career in order to stay home and raise children is considered not to be living up to his potential-as if a job title and salary are the sole measure of human worth.

You'll be told in a hundred ways, some subtle and some not, to keep climbing, and never be satisfied with where you are, who you are, and what you're doing. There are a million ways to sell yourself out, and I guarantee you'll hear about them.

To invent your own life's meaning is not easy, but it's still allowed, and I think you'll be happier for the trouble.

Reading those turgid philosophers here in these remote stone buildings may not get you a job, but if those books have forced you to ask yourself questions about what makes life truthful, purposeful, meaningful, and redeeming, you have the Swiss Army Knife of mental tools, and it's going to come in handy all the time.

I think you'll find that Kenyon touched a deep part of you. These have been formative years. Chances are, at least of your roommates has taught you everything ugly about human nature you ever wanted to know. With luck, you've also had a class that transmitted a spark of insight or interest you'd never had before. Cultivate that interest, and you may find a deeper meaning in your life that feeds your soul and spirit. Your preparation for the real world is not in the answers you've learned, but in the questions you've learned how to ask yourself.

Graduating from Kenyon, I suspect you'll find yourselves quite well prepared indeed.

I wish you all fulfillment and happiness. Congratulations on your achievement.

Toni Morrison at Wellesley College

May 28, 2004

I have to confess to all of you, Madame President, Board of Trustees, members of the faculty, relatives, friends, students. I have had some conflicted feelings about accepting this invitation to deliver the Commencement Address to Wellesley's Class of 2004. My initial response, of course, was glee, a very strong sense of pleasure at, you know, participating personally and formally in the rites of an institution with this reputation: 125 years of history in women's education, an enviable rostrum of graduates, its commitment sustained over the years in making a difference in the world, and its successful resistance to challenges that women's colleges have faced from the beginning and throughout the years. An extraordinary record-and I was delighted to be asked to participate and return to this campus.

But my second response was not so happy. I was very anxious about having to figure out something to say to this particular class at this particular time, because I was really troubled by what could be honestly said in 2004 to over 500 elegantly educated women, or to relatives and friends who are relieved at this moment, but hopeful as well as apprehensive. And to a college faculty and administration dedicated to leadership and knowledgeable about what that entails. Well, of course, I could be sure of the relatives and the friends, just tell them that youth is always insulting because it manages generation after generation not only to survive and replace us, but to triumph over us completely.

And I would remind the faculty and the administration of what each knows: that the work they do takes second place to nothing, nothing at all, and that theirs is a first order profession. Now, of course to the graduates I could make reference to things appropriate to your situations—the future, the past, the present, but most of all happiness. Regarding the future, I would have to rest my case on some bromide, like the future is yours for the taking. Or, that it's whatever you make of it. But the fact is it is not yours for the taking. And it is not whatever you make of it. The future is also what other people make of it, how other people will participate in it and impinge on your experience of it.

But I'm not going to talk anymore about the future because I'm hesitant to describe or predict because I'm not even certain that it exists. That is to say, I'm not certain that somehow, perhaps, a burgeoning ménage a trois of political interests, corporate interests and military interests will not prevail and literally annihilate an inhabitable, humane future. Because I don't think we can any longer rely on separation of powers, free speech, religious tolerance or unchallengeable civil liberties as a matter of course. That is, not while finite humans in the flux of time make decisions of infinite damage. Not while finite humans make infinite claims of virtue and unassailable power that are beyond their competence, if not their reach. So, no happy talk about the future.

Maybe the past offers a better venue. You already share an old tradition of an uncompromisingly intellectual women's college, and that past and that tradition is important to both understand and preserve. It's worthy of reverence and transmission. You've already learned some strategies for appraising the historical and economical and cultural past that you have inherited. But this is not a speech focusing on the splendor of the national past that you are also inheriting.

You will detect a faint note of apology in the descriptions of this bequest, a kind of sorrow that accompanies it, because it's not good enough for you. Because the past is already in debt to the mismanaged present. And besides, contrary to what you may have heard or learned, the past is not done and it is not over, it's still in process, which is another way of saying that when it's critiqued, analyzed, it yields new information about itself. The past is already changing as it is being reexamined, as it is being

listened to for deeper resonances. Actually it can be more liberating than any imagined future if you are willing to identify its evasions, its distortions, its lies, and are willing to unleash its secrets.

But again, it seemed inappropriate, very inappropriate, for me to delve into a past for people who are in the process of making one, forging their own, so I consider this focusing on your responsibility as graduates-graduates of this institution and citizens of the world-and to tell you once again, repeat to you the admonition, a sort of a wish, that you go out and save the world. That is to suggest to you that with energy and right thinking you can certainly improve, certainly you might even rescue it. Now that's a heavy burden to be placed on one generation by a member of another generation because it's a responsibility we ought to share, not save the world, but simply to love it, meaning don't hurt it, it's already beaten and scoured and gasping for breath. Don't hurt it or enable others who do and will. Know and identify the predators waving flags made of dollar bills. They will say anything, promise anything, do everything to turn the planet into a casino where only the house cards can win-little people with finite lives love to play games with the infinite. But I thought better of that, selecting your responsibilities for you. If I did that, I would assume your education had been in vain and that you were incapable of deciding for yourself what your responsibilities should be.

So, I'm left with the last thing that I sort of ignored as a topic. Happiness. I'm sure you have been told that this is the best time of your life. It may be. But if it's true that this is the best time of your life, if you have already lived or are now living at this age the best years, or if the next few turn out to be the best, then you have my condolences. Because you'll want to remain here, stuck in these so-called best years, never maturing, wanting only to look, to feel and be the adolescent that whole industries are devoted to forcing you to remain.

One more flawless article of clothing, one more elaborate toy, the truly perfect diet, the harmless but necessary drug, the almost final elective surgery, the ultimate cosmetic-all designed to maintain hunger for stasis. While children are being eroticized into adults, adults are being exoticized into eternal juvenilia. I know that happiness has been the real, if covert, target of your labors here, your choices of companions, of the profession that you will enter. You deserve it and I want you to gain it, everybody should. But if that's all you have on your mind, then you do have my sympathy, and if these are indeed the best years of your life, you do have my condolences because there is nothing, believe me, more satisfying, more gratifying than true adulthood. The adulthood that is the span of life before you. The process of becoming one is not inevitable. Its achievement is a difficult beauty, an intensely hard won glory, which commercial forces and cultural vapidness should not be permitted to deprive you of.

Now, if I can't talk inspiringly and hopefully about the future or the past or the present and your responsibility to the present or happiness, you might be wondering why I showed up. If things are that dour, that tentative, you might ask yourself, what's this got to do with me? What about my life? I didn't ask to be born, as they say. I beg to differ with you. Yes, you did! In fact, you insisted upon it. It's too easy, you know, too ordinary, too common to not be born. So your presence here on Earth is a very large part your doing.

So it is up to the self, that self that insisted on life that I want to speak to now-candidly-and tell you the truth that I have not really been clearheaded about, the world I have described to you, the one you are inheriting. All my ruminations about the future, the past, responsibility, happiness are really about my generation, not yours. My generation's profligacy, my generation's heedlessness and denial, its frail ego that required endless draughts of power juice and repeated images of weakness in others in order to prop up our own illusion of strength, more and more self congratulation while we sell you more and more games and images of death as entertainment. In short, the palm I was reading wasn't yours, it was the

splayed hand of my own generation and I know no generation has a complete grip on the imagination and work of the next one, not mine and not your parents', not if you refuse to let it be so. You don't have to accept those media labels. You need not settle for any defining category. You don't have to be merely a taxpayer or a red state or a blue state or a consumer or a minority or a majority.

Of course, you're general, but you're also specific. A citizen and a person, and the person you are is like nobody else on the planet. Nobody has the exact memory that you have. What is now known is not all what you are capable of knowing. You are your own stories and therefore free to imagine and experience what it means to be human without wealth. What it feels like to be human without domination over others, without reckless arrogance, without fear of others unlike you, without rotating, rehearsing and reinventing the hatreds you learned in the sandbox. And although you don't have complete control over the narrative (no author does, I can tell you), you could nevertheless create it.

Although you will never fully know or successfully manipulate the characters who surface or disrupt your plot, you can respect the ones who do by paying them close attention and doing them justice. The theme you choose may change or simply elude you, but being your own story means you can always choose the tone. It also means that you can invent the language to say who you are and what you mean. But then, I am a teller of stories and therefore an optimist, a believer in the ethical bend of the human heart, a believer in the mind's disgust with fraud and its appetite for truth, a believer in the ferocity of beauty. So, from my point of view, which is that of a storyteller, I see your life as already artful, waiting, just waiting and ready for you to make it art.

Thank you.

David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College

May 21, 2005

This is Water

“Greetings parents and congratulations to Kenyon’s graduating class of 2005. There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”

This is a standard requirement of US commencement speeches, the deployment of didactic little parable-ish stories. The story thing turns out to be one of the better, less bullshit conventions of the genre, but if you’re worried that I plan to present myself here as the wise, older fish explaining what water is to you younger fish, please don’t be. I am not the wise old fish. The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. Stated as an English sentence, of course, this is just a banal platitude, but the fact is that in the day to day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance, or so I wish to suggest to you on this dry and lovely morning.

Of course the main requirement of speeches like this is that I’m supposed to talk about your liberal arts education’s meaning, to try to explain why the degree you are about to receive has actual human value instead of just a material payoff. So let’s talk about the single most pervasive cliché in the commencement speech genre, which is that a liberal arts education is not so much about filling you up with knowledge as it is about “teaching you how to think.” If you’re like me as a student, you’ve never liked hearing this, and you tend to feel a bit insulted by the claim that you needed anybody to teach you how to think, since the fact that you even got admitted to a college this good seems like proof that you already know how to think. But I’m going to posit to you that the liberal arts cliché turns out not to be insulting at all, because the really significant education in thinking that we’re supposed to get in a place like this isn’t really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about. If your total freedom of choice regarding what to think about seems too obvious to waste time discussing, I’d ask you to think about fish and water, and to bracket for just a few minutes your scepticism about the value of the totally obvious.

Here’s another didactic little story. There are these two guys sitting together in a bar in the remote Alaskan wilderness. One of the guys is religious, the other is an atheist, and the two are arguing about the existence of God with that special intensity that comes after about the fourth beer. And the atheist says: “Look, it’s not like I don’t have actual reasons for not believing in God. It’s not like I haven’t ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and I couldn’t see a thing, and it was 50 below, and so I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out ‘Oh, God, if there is a God, I’m lost in this blizzard, and I’m gonna die if you don’t help me.’” And now, in the bar, the religious guy looks at the atheist all puzzled. “Well then you must believe now,” he says, “After all, here you are, alive.” The atheist just rolls his eyes. “No, man, all that was was a couple Eskimos happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp.”

It’s easy to run this story through kind of a standard liberal arts analysis: the exact same experience can mean two totally different things to two different people, given those people’s two different belief templates and two different ways of constructing meaning from experience. Because we prize tolerance and diversity of belief, nowhere in our liberal arts analysis do we want to claim that one guy’s interpretation is true and the other guy’s is false or bad. Which is fine, except we also never end up

[More Compilations](#)

talking about just where these individual templates and beliefs come from. Meaning, where they come from INSIDE the two guys. As if a person's most basic orientation toward the world, and the meaning of his experience were somehow just hard-wired, like height or shoe-size; or automatically absorbed from the culture, like language. As if how we construct meaning were not actually a matter of personal, intentional choice. Plus, there's the whole matter of arrogance. The nonreligious guy is so totally certain in his dismissal of the possibility that the passing Eskimos had anything to do with his prayer for help. True, there are plenty of religious people who seem arrogant and certain of their own interpretations, too. They're probably even more repulsive than atheists, at least to most of us. But religious dogmatists' problem is exactly the same as the story's unbeliever: blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up.

The point here is that I think this is one part of what teaching me how to think is really supposed to mean. To be just a little less arrogant. To have just a little critical awareness about myself and my certainties. Because a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. I have learned this the hard way, as I predict you graduates will, too.

Here is just one example of the total wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of: everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute centre of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute centre of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.

Please don't worry that I'm getting ready to lecture you about compassion or other-directedness or all the so-called virtues. This is not a matter of virtue. It's a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self. People who can adjust their natural default setting this way are often described as being "well-adjusted", which I suggest to you is not an accidental term.

Given the triumphant academic setting here, an obvious question is how much of this work of adjusting our default setting involves actual knowledge or intellect. This question gets very tricky. Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education—least in my own case—is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualise stuff, to get lost in abstract argument inside my head, instead of simply paying attention to what is going on right in front of me, paying attention to what is going on inside me.

As I'm sure you guys know by now, it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive, instead of getting hypnotised by the constant monologue inside your own head (may be happening right now). Twenty years after my own graduation, I have come gradually to understand that the liberal arts cliché about teaching you how to think is actually shorthand for a much deeper, more serious idea: learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed. Think of the old cliché about "the mind being an excellent servant but a terrible master."

This, like many clichés, so lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses a great and terrible truth. It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot

themselves in: the head. They shoot the terrible master. And the truth is that most of these suicides are actually dead long before they pull the trigger.

And I submit that this is what the real, no bullshit value of your liberal arts education is supposed to be about: how to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out. That may sound like hyperbole, or abstract nonsense. Let's get concrete. The plain fact is that you graduating seniors do not yet have any clue what "day in day out" really means. There happen to be whole, large parts of adult American life that nobody talks about in commencement speeches. One such part involves boredom, routine and petty frustration. The parents and older folks here will know all too well what I'm talking about.

By way of example, let's say it's an average adult day, and you get up in the morning, go to your challenging, white-collar, college-graduate job, and you work hard for eight or ten hours, and at the end of the day you're tired and somewhat stressed and all you want is to go home and have a good supper and maybe unwind for an hour, and then hit the sack early because, of course, you have to get up the next day and do it all again. But then you remember there's no food at home. You haven't had time to shop this week because of your challenging job, and so now after work you have to get in your car and drive to the supermarket. It's the end of the work day and the traffic is apt to be: very bad. So getting to the store takes way longer than it should, and when you finally get there, the supermarket is very crowded, because of course it's the time of day when all the other people with jobs also try to squeeze in some grocery shopping. And the store is hideously lit and infused with soul-killing muzak or corporate pop and it's pretty much the last place you want to be but you can't just get in and quickly out; you have to wander all over the huge, over-lit store's confusing aisles to find the stuff you want and you have to manoeuvre your junky cart through all these other tired, hurried people with carts (et cetera, et cetera, cutting stuff out because this is a long ceremony) and eventually you get all your supper supplies, except now it turns out there aren't enough check-out lanes open even though it's the end-of-the-day rush. So the checkout line is incredibly long, which is stupid and infuriating. But you can't take your frustration out on the frantic lady working the register, who is overworked at a job whose daily tedium and meaninglessness surpasses the imagination of any of us here at a prestigious college.

But anyway, you finally get to the checkout line's front, and you pay for your food, and you get told to "Have a nice day" in a voice that is the absolute voice of death. Then you have to take your creepy, flimsy, plastic bags of groceries in your cart with the one crazy wheel that pulls maddeningly to the left, all the way out through the crowded, bumpy, littery parking lot, and then you have to drive all the way home through slow, heavy, SUV-intensive, rush-hour traffic, et cetera et cetera.

Everyone here has done this, of course. But it hasn't yet been part of you graduates' actual life routine, day after week after month after year.

But it will be. And many more dreary, annoying, seemingly meaningless routines besides. But that is not the point. The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing is gonna come in. Because the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm gonna be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop. Because my natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me. About MY hungeriness and MY fatigue and MY desire to just get home, and it's going to seem for all the world like everybody else is just in my way. And who are all these people in my way? And look at how repulsive most of them are, and how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem in the checkout line, or at how annoying and rude it is that people are

talking loudly on cell phones in the middle of the line. And look at how deeply and personally unfair this is.

Or, of course, if I'm in a more socially conscious liberal arts form of my default setting, I can spend time in the end-of-the-day traffic being disgusted about all the huge, stupid, lane-blocking SUV's and Hummers and V-12 pickup trucks, burning their wasteful, selfish, 40-gallon tanks of gas, and I can dwell on the fact that the patriotic or religious bumper-stickers always seem to be on the biggest, most disgustingly selfish vehicles, driven by the ugliest [responding here to loud applause] — this is an example of how NOT to think, though — most disgustingly selfish vehicles, driven by the ugliest, most inconsiderate and aggressive drivers. And I can think about how our children's children will despise us for wasting all the future's fuel, and probably screwing up the climate, and how spoiled and stupid and selfish and disgusting we all are, and how modern consumer society just sucks, and so forth and so on.

You get the idea.

If I choose to think this way in a store and on the freeway, fine. Lots of us do. Except thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic that it doesn't have to be a choice. It is my natural default setting. It's the automatic way that I experience the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of adult life when I'm operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the centre of the world, and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world's priorities.

The thing is that, of course, there are totally different ways to think about these kinds of situations. In this traffic, all these vehicles stopped and idling in my way, it's not impossible that some of these people in SUV's have been in horrible auto accidents in the past, and now find driving so terrifying that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive. Or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he's trying to get this kid to the hospital, and he's in a bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am: it is actually I who am in HIS way.

Or I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people probably have harder, more tedious and painful lives than I do.

Again, please don't think that I'm giving you moral advice, or that I'm saying you are supposed to think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it. Because it's hard. It takes will and effort, and if you are like me, some days you won't be able to do it, or you just flat out won't want to.

But most days, if you're aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line. Maybe she's not usually like this. Maybe she's been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer. Or maybe this very lady is the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department, who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness. Of course, none of this is likely, but it's also not impossible. It just depends what you want to consider. If you're automatically sure that you know what reality is, and you are operating on your default setting, then you, like me, probably won't consider possibilities that aren't annoying and miserable. But if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.

Not that that mystical stuff is necessarily true. The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to decide how you're gonna try to see it.

This, I submit, is the freedom of a real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship.

Because here's something else that's weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings.

They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.

And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the centre of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talk about much in the great outside world of wanting and achieving.... The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day.

That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.

I know that this stuff probably doesn't sound fun and breezy or grandly inspirational the way a commencement speech is supposed to sound. What it is, as far as I can see, is the capital-T Truth, with a whole lot of rhetorical niceties stripped away. You are, of course, free to think of it whatever you wish. But please don't just dismiss it as just some finger-wagging Dr Laura sermon. None of this stuff is really about morality or religion or dogma or big fancy questions of life after death.

The capital-T Truth is about life BEFORE death.

It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over:

“This is water.”

“This is water.”

It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out. Which means yet another grand cliché turns out to be true: your education really IS the job of a lifetime. And it commences: now.

I wish you way more than luck.

Parker J. Palmer at Naropa University

May 10, 2015

Thank you so much, Jerry [Colona], dear friend, Naropa University graduating class, relatives, friends. I'm deeply moved and I'm profoundly grateful to be here.

This is a wonderful moment in everyone's life, and I'm going to take just a brief moment of personal time to say it's doubly wonderful for me because not only is my wife here, but my son and his wife, and my two little granddaughters ages 8 and 6 are here.

[applause] [...]

And I just want to say a word about them because I've been thinking a lot about them in the Naropa context.

So two years ago my wife and I were in Golden, and we were hiking in the foothills with Naiya, 6 years old, and Kiara, age 4 at the time. And they both were hiking barefoot up these rocky trails. I finally asked Naiya, "How can you do that? It hurts me just to watch you walk this terrain barefoot." And she very quickly and instinctively said, "Well I'm a nature girl and nature loves me and I love nature except for the spiky parts."

[laughter]

At which point Kiara, then age 4, wanted to say something about herself, and she said, "And grandpa, I'm a vegetarian, except for bacon."

[laughter]

So my sense is these two fit the Naropa vibe, would you agree?

[applause] [...] I'm honored to be here but my true honor is that I get to share this important moment in the lives of the class of 2015. A deep bow to all of you, and a deep bow also to the friends, family, relatives, strangers, and to staff, faculty, and administration of Naropa University who have helped you come to this day.

Naropa is a very special place. I think some of you know that the contemplative teaching and learning movement is now getting traction in higher education around the country. It's slow but it's coming, coming to an extent one could not have imagined 40 years ago when this university was founded, let alone even 30 or 20 years ago. And Naropa has planted those seeds. This is a granary of something that is now growing. Our task is to let the world know where the granary is...

[applause]

...so let's try to do that, get the word out. I have tried to be your emissary—I want to do that on into the future because I think what happens here is a very important contribution not only to you as individuals, but to higher education and to the world at large.

I have two modest graduation gifts for the class of 2015. I wish I had more to offer but, for now, this. The first is six brief suggestions about the road ahead of you, and the second is a promise to stop talking in about 12 minutes so you can get on that road sooner rather than later.

My first suggestion is simple. Be reckless when it comes to affairs of the heart.

[cheering]

Now, since half of you misinterpreted that...

[laughter]

It's true I spent the 60's in Berkeley, but I'm 76 now and... well there may be snow on the roof but there's still a fire in the furnace.

[laughter]

Anybody know CPR?

[laughter]

What I *really* mean, parents and grandparents, is be passionate, fall madly in love with life. Be passionate about some part of the natural and/or human worlds and take risks on its behalf, no matter how vulnerable they make you. No one ever died saying, "I'm sure glad for the self-centered, self-serving and self-protective life I lived."

[laughter]

Offer yourself to the world—your energies, your gifts, your visions, your heart—with open-hearted generosity. But understand that when you live that way you will soon learn how little you know and how easy it is to fail. To grow in love and service, you, I, all of us, must value ignorance as much as knowledge and failure as much as success. I know this is ironic advice on graduation day, but clinging to what you already know and do well is the path to an unlived life. So, cultivate beginner's mind, walk straight into your not knowing, and take the risk of failing and falling again and again, then getting up again and again to learn. That's the path to a life lived large in service of love, truth, and justice.

Second, as you integrate ignorance and failure into your knowledge and success, do the same with all the alien parts of yourself. Take everything that's bright and beautiful in you and introduce it to the shadow side of yourself. Let your altruism meet your egotism, let your generosity meet your greed, let your joy meet your grief. Everyone has a shadow, even Buddhists, even Quakers, even high-minded people like us—*especially* high-minded people like us.

[laughter]

But when you are able to say, "I am all of the above, my shadow as well as my light," the shadow's power is put in service of the good. Wholeness is the goal, but wholeness does not mean perfection, it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of your life. As a person who, as Jerry said, has made three deep dives into depression along the way, I do not speak lightly of this. I simply know that it is true.

As you acknowledge and embrace all that you are, you give yourself a gift that will benefit the rest of us as well. Our world is in desperate need of leaders who live what Socrates called "an examined life." In critical areas like politics, religion, business, and the mass media, too many leaders refuse to name and claim their shadows because they don't want to look weak.

[applause]

With shadows that go unexamined and unchecked, they use power heedlessly in ways that harm countless people and undermine public trust in our major institutions. If you value self-knowledge, you will become the leaders we need to help renew this society. But if for some reason—and I doubt that there's anyone

like this here—if for some reason you choose to live an unexamined life after you leave this place, I beg of you, do not take a job that involves other people.

Third, and critically important, as you welcome whatever you find alien within yourself, extend that same welcome to whatever you find alien in the outer world. I don't know any virtue more important these days than hospitality to the stranger, to those we perceive as "other" than us. The old majority in this society, people who look like me, is on its way out.

[applause]

By 2045 the majority of Americans will be people of color.

[applause]

The sad fact is that many in the old majority fear that fact, and their fear, shamelessly manipulated by too many politicians, is bringing us down.

[applause]

The renewal this nation needs will not come from people who are afraid of otherness in race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.

[applause]

It's because of that fear that our once-vital society is gridlocked and stagnant, and our main hope for renewal is diversity, welcomed and embraced.

I recently met a professor on a visit to southern California who had left a prestigious institution, predominantly white, to teach undocumented youth in southern California. I asked him how it was going, and he said, "Best move I ever made. My previous students felt entitled and demanded to be entertained. My undocumented students are hungry to learn, hard-working, and courageous enough to keep moving out of their comfort zones." America will be renewed by people with these qualities.

[applause]

And if we who have privilege and power will welcome them, collaborate with them, and help remove the obstacles in their way, 2045 will be a year of great promise for all of us.

Fourth, take on big jobs worth doing—jobs like the spread of love, peace, and justice. That means refusing to be seduced by our cultural obsession with being effective as measured by short-term results. We all want our work to make a difference, but if we take on the big jobs and our only measure of success is next quarter's bottom line, we'll end up disappointed, dropping out, and in despair.

Think of someone you respect because he or she lived a life devoted to high values—a Rosa Parks, a Nelson Mandela, or someone known only to a few. At the end of the road was that person able to say, "I'm sure glad I devoted my life to that job, because now everyone in the world can check it off their to do lists forever and ever." No, our heroes take on impossible jobs and stay with them for the long haul because they live by a standard that trumps effectiveness. The name of that standard, I think, is faithfulness—faithfulness to your gifts, faithfulness to your perception of the needs of the world, and faithfulness to offering your gifts to whatever needs are within your reach.

The tighter we cling to the norm of effectiveness the smaller the tasks we'll take on, because they are the only ones that get short-term results. Public education is a tragic example. We in this country no longer

care about educating children, a big job that's never done. We care only about getting kids to pass tests with measurable results.

[applause]

And we care about that whether or not, or without even considering, whether they measure anything that matters. In the process, we're crushing the spirits of a lot of good teachers and vulnerable kids. Care about being effective, of course, but care even more about being faithful, as countless teachers do—faithful to your calling, and to the true needs of those entrusted to your care. You won't get the big jobs done in your lifetime, but if at the end of the day you can say, "I was faithful," I think you'll be okay.

[applause]

Fifth, [...] since suffering as well as joy comes with being human, I urge you to remember this: Violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering. Violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering. Sometimes we aim that violence at ourselves, as in overwork that leads to burnout or worse, or in the many forms of substance abuse. Sometimes we aim that violence at other people—racism, sexism, and homophobia often come from people trying to relieve their suffering by claiming superiority over others. The good news is that suffering can be transformed into something that brings life, not death. It happens every day.

I'm 76 years old, I now know many people who've suffered the loss of the dearest person in their lives. At first they go into deep grief, certain that their lives will never again be worth living. But then they slowly awaken to the fact that not in spite of their loss, but because of it, they've become bigger, more compassionate people, with more capacity of heart to take in other people's sorrows and joys. These are broken-hearted people, but their hearts have been broken open, rather than broken apart. So every day exercise your heart, by taking in life's little pains and joys. That kind of exercise will make your heart supple, the way a runner makes a muscle supple, so that when it breaks, (and it surely will,) it will break not into a fragment grenade, but into a greater capacity for love.

Sixth, and finally, I quote Saint Benedict (not a Buddhist but still worth quoting) who said, "Daily, keep your death before your eyes." That may sound like a morbid practice, but as I think you know, it isn't. If you hold a healthy awareness of your own mortality, your eyes will be opened to the grandeur and glory of life, and that will evoke all of the virtues I've named, as well as those I haven't, such as hope, generosity, and gratitude. If the unexamined life is not worth living, it's equally true that the un-lived life is not worth examining.

So I'll close with this brief quote from a great writer Diane Ackerman, who reminds us to live, truly live, our lives:

"The great affair, the love affair with life, is to live as variously as possible, to groom one's curiosity like a high-spirited thoroughbred, climb aboard, and gallop over the thick, sun-struck hills every day. Where there is no risk, the emotional terrain is flat and unyielding, and, despite all its dimensions, valleys, pinnacles, and detours, life will seem to have none of its magnificent geography, only a length. It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies between."

Once again, a deep bow to the class of 2015. To each and every one of you, traveling mercies and blessings as you make the journey from one mystery to the next and the next and the next.

The Builders

Michael Dell – 2003 – University of Texas at Austin

Steve Jobs – 2005 – Stanford University

Bill Gates – 2007 – Harvard University

Jeff Bezos – 2010 – Princeton University

Elon Musk – 2012 – California Institute of Technology

If you know of any commencement speeches you think I'd like or have any thoughts on categories I've missed, please email at kevin@12mv2.com with the subject "Commencement Speeches you may like." Thank you!

[More Compilations](#)

Michael S. Dell at University of Texas at Austin

May 17, 2003

Thank you, President Faulkner.

I want to start by congratulating the Class of 2003 on your great success!

It's an honor for me to be here. I know that many of you, both graduates and parents, have been waiting for this day for many years. I'm very proud to have my parents with me today, who have also been waiting for many years. Mom and Dad ... I have some bad news for you. I may be on the stage, but I'm still not going home with a degree.

Though I left UT prior to the achievement that you're all celebrating, this school has been a big part of my life in many ways: as a source of guidance and counsel for a young start-up company, as a constant resource of talent and support for a growing and established business, and as the foundation for a dream that this community has helped to build. I feel a tremendous connection with this university, and that's why I'm so honored to be with you this evening.

I'd like to share my remarks tonight in memory of Dr. George Kozmetsky—a longtime friend of Dell, the University of Texas, and the Austin community. George was a visionary leader who recognized the potential in people and helped fuel their success with his wisdom and counsel. I was fortunate to be one of those people.

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to travel a less-traditional path. But I've managed to cover a fair amount of territory. There may be some lessons that I've learned that could help you in some small measure on your road ahead.

As you stand here tonight, you are at the starting point of a wonderful journey. But it's a journey that can only begin with your decision to embark. We are a nation of accomplishment, and this ceremony is a great testament to that. But the unspoken requirement of a commencement is that you now must commence. There are countless contributions and achievements that never occurred, all due to a failure to begin.

Early in the history of Dell, we recognized that our path to greater success led us out of Austin, out of Texas, and even out of this country. So as a three-year-old company, with just 150 employees, we opened our first international operation in the UK ... to great skepticism. The only true believers were the Dell team ... and of course, our customers. Since then we've expanded to serve customers around the world. But it all started with that first decision to embark.

And now you've accomplished something great and honorable and important here at UT, and it's time for you to move on to what's next. But you must not let anything deter you from taking those first steps. You have an abundance of opportunities before you—but don't spend so much time trying to choose the perfect opportunity, that you miss the right opportunity. Recognize that there will be failures, and acknowledge that there will be obstacles. But you will learn from your mistakes and the mistakes of others, for there is very little learning in success.

Fourteen years ago, Dell had the opportunity to learn two big lessons ... the hard way. One lesson was from a failure to manage our inventory properly, and the other was from a failure to listen to our customers when it came to developing new products. But we followed the advice that Dr. Kozmetsky gave me, and we fixed our problems as fast as we found them. Today, we set the standard for managing

inventory and listening and responding to customers, and we owe those strengths to a willingness to try, and to fail, and to learn.

With the understanding that you will face tough times and amazing experiences, you must also commit to the adventure. Just have faith in the skills and the knowledge you've been blessed with and go. Because regrets are born of paths never taken.

Then, as you start your journey, the first thing you should do is throw away that store-bought map and begin to draw your own. When Dell got started, it didn't come with a manual on how to become number 1 in the world. We had to figure that out every step of the way. And with each new product and new market, the industry "experts" said we'd fail. Just a few short years ago, we announced plans to build powerful computers at the center of the Internet ("servers" for those of you from the engineering school.) Through the chorus of naysayers, we emerged as a world leader in servers, and we continue to gain momentum. And as always, we did it our way, with customers—not the experts—in mind.

You too have an advantage that you're not encumbered by years of conventional thinking. You have a new and fresh perspective with which to view the world. Your time at this great university has helped sharpen your sense of discovery, and there is no better catalyst for success than curiosity.

It's through curiosity and looking at opportunities in new ways that we've always mapped our path at Dell. Of course, we didn't invent the concept of selling directly to customers, and we didn't invent the personal computer ... and we certainly didn't invent the Internet. But there's always an opportunity to make a difference. There is always the chance to refine something, to eliminate unnecessary steps, or to look at something in a new light. You can stand on the shoulders of the giants who came before and see a little further. And sometimes there's an opportunity to achieve a major breakthrough with a completely new idea that re-defines the subject.

But whether it's evolution or revolution, there's always a better way to build a computer, or map a genome, or liberate a country, or take a basketball team to the Final Four. Just work to understand the world around you. Read books. Read websites. Read other people. Circle the pitfalls and highlight the opportunities. Then build a vision of how it could all be better and work like hell to make it happen.

We are fortunate to live in a country that accepts and even encourages experimentation and new ideas. America's greatness is based on the fundamental belief that our greatest individual contributions are achieved along the course we chart for ourselves.

As you walk the path you've chosen, remember that the road ahead is paved with relationships. I've enjoyed some great fortune, but none of it would have happened without the people who shared their wisdom, the hard work of the Dell team worldwide, and the love and support of my family and friends. Remember ... there's no such thing as a self-made success.

As Dell has grown over the years, many critics have asked me when I would finally step aside and let others run things. But the truth is, other people have been helping run things at Dell for a long time. The greatest mistake you can make is thinking you can do it all by yourself.

My most important role at Dell is growing and developing a strong team ... and I give all of myself in that effort. I learned very early to surround myself with talented people who challenge convention, offer new ideas, and relentlessly drive for improvement. And to let those people thrive.

Try never to be the smartest person in the room. And if you are, I suggest you invite smarter people ... or find a different room. In professional circles it's called networking. In organizations it's called team

building. And in life it's called family, friends, and community. We are all gifts to each other, and my own growth as a leader has shown me again and again that the most rewarding experiences come from my relationships.

And even as you keep traveling the road ahead, you must always remember where you came from. Each of us carries the dust and dreams of the places that helped shape us, and all of us can count our blessings that our path has taken us through Texas.

There's no other place that so purely preserved a centuries-old heritage of hard work, self reliance, and initiative like Texas. There's no other place whose sons and daughters have so consistently set the standard—from government, business, and music, to sports, education, and technology—like Texas. And there's no other place that can stir such jealousy in New Yorkers, such disdain in Californians, and such contempt in the French—yet hold their utmost respect—like the Lone Star State.

The spirit of Texas is the purest concentration of the American spirit. Texas is to this country, what America is to the world. And there is no greater embodiment of that spirit than The University of Texas at Austin. During your travels, remember where you came from, and do right by Texas.

Finally, many times along the way you're going to ask why. Why am I on this path? What is it all about? You'll ask yourself those questions in 10 years and in 20 years as often as you're asking them now. Well ... I have an answer for you. It's all about winning. That's right, winning.

But I'm not talking about the most points, or toys, or market share. (Though I certainly like market share.) I'm talking about winning in a contest with your own potential. I'm talking about believing in yourself enough to become the best accountant, engineer, or teacher you can possibly be. I'm talking about never measuring your success based on the success of others – because you just might set the bar too low.

I was fortunate to find my passion early in life. I started as a UT biology major and soon realized that all of those stacks of computer parts in my room were trying to tell me something. (And my roommate had a few things to say as well.) So 19 years ago, when I was 19 years old, I started Dell in that dorm room right over there. And despite juggling my classes and a computer company ... I just knew there had to be something easier than organic chemistry!

But many people find their passion later in life, and others never find it at all. And for some, their greatest passion is the search itself. But whether you've found your calling, or if you're still searching, passion should be the fire that drives your life's work.

The key is to listen to your heart and let it carry you in the direction of your dreams. I've learned that it's possible to set your sights high and achieve your dreams and do it with integrity, character, and love. And each day that you're moving toward your dreams without compromising who you are, you're winning. Look around you. At a school this size, with an international reputation for greatness, you might think of yourself as just a number. However, I recommend that you choose the number 1.

I've talked today about a journey, one that each of us travels. Often we travel together, as all of you have during your time at UT. But in the end, it's your journey. Your path to travel and your responsibilities along the way. You are free to choose, and you are free to succeed. It just takes hard work and a dream. Most who finally leave this great university never imagine that they're going to change the world. Yet every one of you will. How you change the world, is all up to you to decide.

I wish you all a great adventure on the road ahead.

Thank you.

Steve Jobs at Stanford University

June 12, 2005

I am honored to be with you today at your commencement from one of the finest universities in the world. I never graduated from college. Truth be told, this is the closest I've ever gotten to a college graduation. Today I want to tell you three stories from my life. That's it. No big deal. Just three stories.

The first story is about connecting the dots.

I dropped out of Reed College after the first 6 months, but then stayed around as a drop-in for another 18 months or so before I really quit. So why did I drop out?

It started before I was born. My biological mother was a young, unwed college graduate student, and she decided to put me up for adoption. She felt very strongly that I should be adopted by college graduates, so everything was all set for me to be adopted at birth by a lawyer and his wife. Except that when I popped out they decided at the last minute that they really wanted a girl. So my parents, who were on a waiting list, got a call in the middle of the night asking: "We have an unexpected baby boy; do you want him?" They said: "Of course." My biological mother later found out that my mother had never graduated from college and that my father had never graduated from high school. She refused to sign the final adoption papers. She only relented a few months later when my parents promised that I would someday go to college.

And 17 years later I did go to college. But I naively chose a college that was almost as expensive as Stanford, and all of my working-class parents' savings were being spent on my college tuition. After six months, I couldn't see the value in it. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and no idea how college was going to help me figure it out. And here I was spending all of the money my parents had saved their entire life. So I decided to drop out and trust that it would all work out OK. It was pretty scary at the time, but looking back it was one of the best decisions I ever made. The minute I dropped out I could stop taking the required classes that didn't interest me, and begin dropping in on the ones that looked interesting.

It wasn't all romantic. I didn't have a dorm room, so I slept on the floor in friends' rooms, I returned Coke bottles for the 5¢ deposits to buy food with, and I would walk the 7 miles across town every Sunday night to get one good meal a week at the Hare Krishna temple. I loved it. And much of what I stumbled into by following my curiosity and intuition turned out to be priceless later on. Let me give you one example:

Reed College at that time offered perhaps the best calligraphy instruction in the country. Throughout the campus every poster, every label on every drawer, was beautifully hand calligraphed. Because I had dropped out and didn't have to take the normal classes, I decided to take a calligraphy class to learn how to do this. I learned about serif and sans serif typefaces, about varying the amount of space between different letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating.

None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life. But 10 years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts. And since Windows just copied the Mac, it's likely that no personal computer would have them. If I had never dropped out, I would have never dropped in on this calligraphy class, and personal computers might not

have the wonderful typography that they do. Of course it was impossible to connect the dots looking forward when I was in college. But it was very, very clear looking backward 10 years later.

Again, you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life.

My second story is about love and loss.

I was lucky — I found what I loved to do early in life. Woz and I started Apple in my parents' garage when I was 20. We worked hard, and in 10 years Apple had grown from just the two of us in a garage into a \$2 billion company with over 4,000 employees. We had just released our finest creation — the Macintosh — a year earlier, and I had just turned 30. And then I got fired. How can you get fired from a company you started? Well, as Apple grew we hired someone who I thought was very talented to run the company with me, and for the first year or so things went well. But then our visions of the future began to diverge and eventually we had a falling out. When we did, our Board of Directors sided with him. So at 30 I was out. And very publicly out. What had been the focus of my entire adult life was gone, and it was devastating.

I really didn't know what to do for a few months. I felt that I had let the previous generation of entrepreneurs down — that I had dropped the baton as it was being passed to me. I met with David Packard and Bob Noyce and tried to apologize for screwing up so badly. I was a very public failure, and I even thought about running away from the valley. But something slowly began to dawn on me — I still loved what I did. The turn of events at Apple had not changed that one bit. I had been rejected, but I was still in love. And so I decided to start over.

I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.

During the next five years, I started a company named NeXT, another company named Pixar, and fell in love with an amazing woman who would become my wife. Pixar went on to create the world's first computer animated feature film, *Toy Story*, and is now the most successful animation studio in the world. In a remarkable turn of events, Apple bought NeXT, I returned to Apple, and the technology we developed at NeXT is at the heart of Apple's current renaissance. And Laurene and I have a wonderful family together.

I'm pretty sure none of this would have happened if I hadn't been fired from Apple. It was awful tasting medicine, but I guess the patient needed it. Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick. Don't lose faith. I'm convinced that the only thing that kept me going was that I loved what I did. You've got to find what you love. And that is as true for your work as it is for your lovers. Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it. And, like any great relationship, it just gets better and better as the years roll on. So keep looking until you find it. Don't settle.

My third story is about death.

When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right." It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33

years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: “If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?” And whenever the answer has been “No” for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.

Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure — these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.

About a year ago I was diagnosed with cancer. I had a scan at 7:30 in the morning, and it clearly showed a tumor on my pancreas. I didn’t even know what a pancreas was. The doctors told me this was almost certainly a type of cancer that is incurable, and that I should expect to live no longer than three to six months. My doctor advised me to go home and get my affairs in order, which is doctor’s code for prepare to die. It means to try to tell your kids everything you thought you’d have the next 10 years to tell them in just a few months. It means to make sure everything is buttoned up so that it will be as easy as possible for your family. It means to say your goodbyes.

I lived with that diagnosis all day. Later that evening I had a biopsy, where they stuck an endoscope down my throat, through my stomach and into my intestines, put a needle into my pancreas and got a few cells from the tumor. I was sedated, but my wife, who was there, told me that when they viewed the cells under a microscope the doctors started crying because it turned out to be a very rare form of pancreatic cancer that is curable with surgery. I had the surgery and I’m fine now.

This was the closest I’ve been to facing death, and I hope it’s the closest I get for a few more decades. Having lived through it, I can now say this to you with a bit more certainty than when death was a useful but purely intellectual concept:

No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true.

Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

When I was young, there was an amazing publication called *The Whole Earth Catalog*, which was one of the bibles of my generation. It was created by a fellow named Stewart Brand not far from here in Menlo Park, and he brought it to life with his poetic touch. This was in the late 1960s, before personal computers and desktop publishing, so it was all made with typewriters, scissors and Polaroid cameras. It was sort of like Google in paperback form, 35 years before Google came along: It was idealistic, and overflowing with neat tools and great notions.

Stewart and his team put out several issues of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, and then when it had run its course, they put out a final issue. It was the mid-1970s, and I was your age. On the back cover of their final issue was a photograph of an early morning country road, the kind you might find yourself hitchhiking on if you were so adventurous. Beneath it were the words: “Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.” It

was their farewell message as they signed off. Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish. And I have always wished that for myself. And now, as you graduate to begin anew, I wish that for you.

Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.

Thank you all very much.

Bill Gates at Harvard University

June 7, 2007

President Bok, former President Rudenstine, incoming President Faust, members of the Harvard Corporation and the Board of Overseers, members of the faculty, parents, and especially, the graduates:

I've been waiting more than 30 years to say this: "Dad, I always told you I'd come back and get my degree."

I want to thank Harvard for this timely honor. I'll be changing my job next year ... and it will be nice to finally have a college degree on my resume.

I applaud the graduates today for taking a much more direct route to your degrees. For my part, I'm just happy that the Crimson has called me "Harvard's most successful dropout." I guess that makes me valedictorian of my own special class ... I did the best of everyone who failed.

But I also want to be recognized as the guy who got Steve Ballmer to drop out of business school. I'm a bad influence. That's why I was invited to speak at your graduation. If I had spoken at your orientation, fewer of you might be here today.

Harvard was just a phenomenal experience for me. Academic life was fascinating. I used to sit in on lots of classes I hadn't even signed up for. And dorm life was terrific. I lived up at Radcliffe, in Currier House. There were always lots of people in my dorm room late at night discussing things, because everyone knew I didn't worry about getting up in the morning. That's how I came to be the leader of the anti-social group. We clung to each other as a way of validating our rejection of all those social people.

Radcliffe was a great place to live. There were more women up there, and most of the guys were science-math types. That combination offered me the best odds, if you know what I mean. This is where I learned the sad lesson that improving your odds doesn't guarantee success.

One of my biggest memories of Harvard came in January 1975, when I made a call from Currier House to a company in Albuquerque that had begun making the world's first personal computers. I offered to sell them software.

I worried that they would realize I was just a student in a dorm and hang up on me. Instead they said: "We're not quite ready, come see us in a month," which was a good thing, because we hadn't written the software yet. From that moment, I worked day and night on this little extra credit project that marked the end of my college education and the beginning of a remarkable journey with Microsoft.

What I remember above all about Harvard was being in the midst of so much energy and intelligence. It could be exhilarating, intimidating, sometimes even discouraging, but always challenging. It was an amazing privilege – and though I left early, I was transformed by my years at Harvard, the friendships I made, and the ideas I worked on.

But taking a serious look back ... I do have one big regret.

I left Harvard with no real awareness of the awful inequities in the world – the appalling disparities of health, and wealth, and opportunity that condemn millions of people to lives of despair.

I learned a lot here at Harvard about new ideas in economics and politics. I got great exposure to the advances being made in the sciences.

But humanity's greatest advances are not in its discoveries – but in how those discoveries are applied to reduce inequity. Whether through democracy, strong public education, quality health care, or broad economic opportunity – reducing inequity is the highest human achievement.

I left campus knowing little about the millions of young people cheated out of educational opportunities here in this country. And I knew nothing about the millions of people living in unspeakable poverty and disease in developing countries.

It took me decades to find out.

You graduates came to Harvard at a different time. You know more about the world's inequities than the classes that came before. In your years here, I hope you've had a chance to think about how – in this age of accelerating technology – we can finally take on these inequities, and we can solve them.

Imagine, just for the sake of discussion, that you had a few hours a week and a few dollars a month to donate to a cause – and you wanted to spend that time and money where it would have the greatest impact in saving and improving lives. Where would you spend it?

For Melinda and for me, the challenge is the same: how can we do the most good for the greatest number with the resources we have.

During our discussions on this question, Melinda and I read an article about the millions of children who were dying every year in poor countries from diseases that we had long ago made harmless in this country. Measles, malaria, pneumonia, hepatitis B, yellow fever. One disease I had never even heard of, rotavirus, was killing half a million kids each year – none of them in the United States.

We were shocked. We had just assumed that if millions of children were dying and they could be saved, the world would make it a priority to discover and deliver the medicines to save them. But it did not. For under a dollar, there were interventions that could save lives that just weren't being delivered.

If you believe that every life has equal value, it's revolting to learn that some lives are seen as worth saving and others are not. We said to ourselves: "This can't be true. But if it is true, it deserves to be the priority of our giving."

So we began our work in the same way anyone here would begin it. We asked: "How could the world let these children die?"

The answer is simple, and harsh. The market did not reward saving the lives of these children, and governments did not subsidize it. So the children died because their mothers and their fathers had no power in the market and no voice in the system.

But you and I have both.

We can make market forces work better for the poor if we can develop a more creative capitalism – if we can stretch the reach of market forces so that more people can make a profit, or at least make a living, serving people who are suffering from the worst inequities. We also can press governments around the world to spend taxpayer money in ways that better reflect the values of the people who pay the taxes.

If we can find approaches that meet the needs of the poor in ways that generate profits for business and votes for politicians, we will have found a sustainable way to reduce inequity in the world.

This task is open-ended. It can never be finished. But a conscious effort to answer this challenge will change the world.

I am optimistic that we can do this, but I talk to skeptics who claim there is no hope. They say: “Inequity has been with us since the beginning, and will be with us till the end – because people just ... don’t ... care.”

I completely disagree.

I believe we have more caring than we know what to do with.

All of us here in this Yard, at one time or another, have seen human tragedies that broke our hearts, and yet we did nothing – not because we didn’t care, but because we didn’t know what to do. If we had known how to help, we would have acted.

The barrier to change is not too little caring; it is too much complexity.

To turn caring into action, we need to see a problem, see a solution, and see the impact. But complexity blocks all three steps.

Even with the advent of the Internet and 24-hour news, it is still a complex enterprise to get people to truly see the problems. When an airplane crashes, officials immediately call a press conference. They promise to investigate, determine the cause, and prevent similar crashes in the future.

But if the officials were brutally honest, they would say: “Of all the people in the world who died today from preventable causes, one half of one percent of them were on this plane. We’re determined to do everything possible to solve the problem that took the lives of the one half of one percent.”

The bigger problem is not the plane crash, but the millions of preventable deaths.

We don’t read much about these deaths. The media covers what’s new – and millions of people dying is nothing new. So it stays in the background, where it’s easier to ignore. But even when we do see it or read about it, it’s difficult to keep our eyes on the problem. It’s hard to look at suffering if the situation is so complex that we don’t know how to help. And so we look away.

If we can really see a problem, which is the first step, we come to the second step: cutting through the complexity to find a solution.

Finding solutions is essential if we want to make the most of our caring. If we have clear and proven answers anytime an organization or individual asks “How can I help?,” then we can get action – and we can make sure that none of the caring in the world is wasted. But complexity makes it hard to mark a path of action for everyone who cares — and that makes it hard for their caring to matter.

Cutting through complexity to find a solution runs through four predictable stages: determine a goal, find the highest-leverage approach, discover the ideal technology for that approach, and in the meantime, make the smartest application of the technology that you already have — whether it’s something sophisticated, like a drug, or something simpler, like a bednet.

The AIDS epidemic offers an example. The broad goal, of course, is to end the disease. The highest-leverage approach is prevention. The ideal technology would be a vaccine that gives lifetime immunity with a single dose. So governments, drug companies, and foundations fund vaccine research. But their work is likely to take more than a decade, so in the meantime, we have to work with what we have in hand – and the best prevention approach we have now is getting people to avoid risky behavior.

Pursuing that goal starts the four-step cycle again. This is the pattern. The crucial thing is to never stop thinking and working – and never do what we did with malaria and tuberculosis in the 20th century – which is to surrender to complexity and quit.

The final step – after seeing the problem and finding an approach – is to measure the impact of your work and share your successes and failures so that others learn from your efforts.

You have to have the statistics, of course. You have to be able to show that a program is vaccinating millions more children. You have to be able to show a decline in the number of children dying from these diseases. This is essential not just to improve the program, but also to help draw more investment from business and government.

But if you want to inspire people to participate, you have to show more than numbers; you have to convey the human impact of the work – so people can feel what saving a life means to the families affected.

I remember going to Davos some years back and sitting on a global health panel that was discussing ways to save millions of lives. Millions! Think of the thrill of saving just one person's life – then multiply that by millions. ... Yet this was the most boring panel I've ever been on – ever. So boring even I couldn't bear it.

What made that experience especially striking was that I had just come from an event where we were introducing version 13 of some piece of software, and we had people jumping and shouting with excitement. I love getting people excited about software – but why can't we generate even more excitement for saving lives?

You can't get people excited unless you can help them see and feel the impact. And how you do that – is a complex question.

Still, I'm optimistic. Yes, inequity has been with us forever, but the new tools we have to cut through complexity have not been with us forever. They are new – they can help us make the most of our caring – and that's why the future can be different from the past.

The defining and ongoing innovations of this age – biotechnology, the computer, the Internet – give us a chance we've never had before to end extreme poverty and end death from preventable disease.

Sixty years ago, George Marshall came to this commencement and announced a plan to assist the nations of post-war Europe. He said: "I think one difficulty is that the problem is one of such enormous complexity that the very mass of facts presented to the public by press and radio make it exceedingly difficult for the man in the street to reach a clear appraisal of the situation. It is virtually impossible at this distance to grasp at all the real significance of the situation."

Thirty years after Marshall made his address, as my class graduated without me, technology was emerging that would make the world smaller, more open, more visible, less distant.

The emergence of low-cost personal computers gave rise to a powerful network that has transformed opportunities for learning and communicating.

The magical thing about this network is not just that it collapses distance and makes everyone your neighbor. It also dramatically increases the number of brilliant minds we can have working together on the same problem – and that scales up the rate of innovation to a staggering degree.

At the same time, for every person in the world who has access to this technology, five people don't. That means many creative minds are left out of this discussion — smart people with practical intelligence and relevant experience who don't have the technology to hone their talents or contribute their ideas to the world.

We need as many people as possible to have access to this technology, because these advances are triggering a revolution in what human beings can do for one another. They are making it possible not just for national governments, but for universities, corporations, smaller organizations, and even individuals to see problems, see approaches, and measure the impact of their efforts to address the hunger, poverty, and desperation George Marshall spoke of 60 years ago.

Members of the Harvard Family: Here in the Yard is one of the great collections of intellectual talent in the world.

What for?

There is no question that the faculty, the alumni, the students, and the benefactors of Harvard have used their power to improve the lives of people here and around the world. But can we do more? Can Harvard dedicate its intellect to improving the lives of people who will never even hear its name?

Let me make a request of the deans and the professors — the intellectual leaders here at Harvard: As you hire new faculty, award tenure, review curriculum, and determine degree requirements, please ask yourselves:

Should our best minds be dedicated to solving our biggest problems?

Should Harvard encourage its faculty to take on the world's worst inequities? Should Harvard students learn about the depth of global poverty ... the prevalence of world hunger ... the scarcity of clean water ... the girls kept out of school ... the children who die from diseases we can cure?

Should the world's most privileged people learn about the lives of the world's least privileged?

These are not rhetorical questions — you will answer with your policies.

My mother, who was filled with pride the day I was admitted here — never stopped pressing me to do more for others. A few days before my wedding, she hosted a bridal event, at which she read aloud a letter about marriage that she had written to Melinda. My mother was very ill with cancer at the time, but she saw one more opportunity to deliver her message, and at the close of the letter she said: "From those to whom much is given, much is expected."

When you consider what those of us here in this Yard have been given — in talent, privilege, and opportunity — there is almost no limit to what the world has a right to expect from us.

In line with the promise of this age, I want to exhort each of the graduates here to take on an issue — a complex problem, a deep inequity, and become a specialist on it. If you make it the focus of your career, that would be phenomenal. But you don't have to do that to make an impact. For a few hours every week, you can use the growing power of the Internet to get informed, find others with the same interests, see the barriers, and find ways to cut through them.

Don't let complexity stop you. Be activists. Take on the big inequities. It will be one of the great experiences of your lives.

You graduates are coming of age in an amazing time. As you leave Harvard, you have technology that members of my class never had. You have awareness of global inequity, which we did not have. And with that awareness, you likely also have an informed conscience that will torment you if you abandon these people whose lives you could change with very little effort.

You have more than we had; you must start sooner, and carry on longer.

Knowing what you know, how could you not?

And I hope you will come back here to Harvard 30 years from now and reflect on what you have done with your talent and your energy. I hope you will judge yourselves not on your professional accomplishments alone, but also on how well you have addressed the world's deepest inequities ... on how well you treated people a world away who have nothing in common with you but their humanity.

Good luck.

Jeff Bezos at Princeton University

May 30, 2010

We are What We Choose

As a kid, I spent my summers with my grandparents on their ranch in Texas. I helped fix windmills, vaccinate cattle, and do other chores. We also watched soap operas every afternoon, especially “Days of our Lives.” My grandparents belonged to a Caravan Club, a group of Airstream trailer owners who travel together around the U.S. and Canada. And every few summers, we’d join the caravan. We’d hitch up the Airstream trailer to my grandfather’s car, and off we’d go, in a line with 300 other Airstream adventurers. I loved and worshipped my grandparents and I really looked forward to these trips. On one particular trip, I was about 10 years old. I was rolling around in the big bench seat in the back of the car. My grandfather was driving. And my grandmother had the passenger seat. She smoked throughout these trips, and I hated the smell.

At that age, I’d take any excuse to make estimates and do minor arithmetic. I’d calculate our gas mileage -- figure out useless statistics on things like grocery spending. I’d been hearing an ad campaign about smoking. I can’t remember the details, but basically the ad said, every puff of a cigarette takes some number of minutes off of your life: I think it might have been two minutes per puff. At any rate, I decided to do the math for my grandmother. I estimated the number of cigarettes per days, estimated the number of puffs per cigarette and so on. When I was satisfied that I’d come up with a reasonable number, I poked my head into the front of the car, tapped my grandmother on the shoulder, and proudly proclaimed, “At two minutes per puff, you’ve taken nine years off your life!”

I have a vivid memory of what happened, and it was not what I expected. I expected to be applauded for my cleverness and arithmetic skills. “Jeff, you’re so smart. You had to have made some tricky estimates, figure out the number of minutes in a year and do some division.” That’s not what happened. Instead, my grandmother burst into tears. I sat in the backseat and did not know what to do. While my grandmother sat crying, my grandfather, who had been driving in silence, pulled over onto the shoulder of the highway. He got out of the car and came around and opened my door and waited for me to follow. Was I in trouble? My grandfather was a highly intelligent, quiet man. He had never said a harsh word to me, and maybe this was to be the first time? Or maybe he would ask that I get back in the car and apologize to my grandmother. I had no experience in this realm with my grandparents and no way to gauge what the consequences might be. We stopped beside the trailer. My grandfather looked at me, and after a bit of silence, he gently and calmly said, “Jeff, one day you’ll understand that it’s harder to be kind than clever.”

What I want to talk to you about today is the difference between gifts and choices. Cleverness is a gift, kindness is a choice. Gifts are easy -- they’re given after all. Choices can be hard. You can seduce yourself with your gifts if you’re not careful, and if you do, it’ll probably be to the detriment of your choices.

This is a group with many gifts. I’m sure one of your gifts is the gift of a smart and capable brain. I’m confident that’s the case because admission is competitive and if there weren’t some signs that you’re clever, the dean of admission wouldn’t have let you in.

Your smarts will come in handy because you will travel in a land of marvels. We humans -- plodding as we are -- will astonish ourselves. We’ll invent ways to generate clean energy and a lot of it. Atom by atom, we’ll assemble tiny machines that will enter cell walls and make repairs. This month comes the extraordinary but also inevitable news that we’ve synthesized life. In the coming years, we’ll not only

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synthesize it, but we'll engineer it to specifications. I believe you'll even see us understand the human brain. Jules Verne, Mark Twain, Galileo, Newton -- all the curious from the ages would have wanted to be alive most of all right now. As a civilization, we will have so many gifts, just as you as individuals have so many individual gifts as you sit before me.

How will you use these gifts? And will you take pride in your gifts or pride in your choices?

I got the idea to start Amazon 16 years ago. I came across the fact that Web usage was growing at 2,300 percent per year. I'd never seen or heard of anything that grew that fast, and the idea of building an online bookstore with millions of titles -- something that simply couldn't exist in the physical world -- was very exciting to me. I had just turned 30 years old, and I'd been married for a year. I told my wife MacKenzie that I wanted to quit my job and go do this crazy thing that probably wouldn't work since most startups don't, and I wasn't sure what would happen after that. MacKenzie (also a Princeton grad and sitting here in the second row) told me I should go for it. As a young boy, I'd been a garage inventor. I'd invented an automatic gate closer out of cement-filled tires, a solar cooker that didn't work very well out of an umbrella and tinfoil, baking-pan alarms to entrap my siblings. I'd always wanted to be an inventor, and she wanted me to follow my passion.

I was working at a financial firm in New York City with a bunch of very smart people, and I had a brilliant boss that I much admired. I went to my boss and told him I wanted to start a company selling books on the Internet. He took me on a long walk in Central Park, listened carefully to me, and finally said, "That sounds like a really good idea, but it would be an even better idea for someone who didn't already have a good job." That logic made some sense to me, and he convinced me to think about it for 48 hours before making a final decision. Seen in that light, it really was a difficult choice, but ultimately, I decided I had to give it a shot. I didn't think I'd regret trying and failing. And I suspected I would always be haunted by a decision to not try at all. After much consideration, I took the less safe path to follow my passion, and I'm proud of that choice.

Tomorrow, in a very real sense, your life -- the life you author from scratch on your own -- begins.

How will you use your gifts? What choices will you make?

Will inertia be your guide, or will you follow your passions?

Will you follow dogma, or will you be original?

Will you choose a life of ease, or a life of service and adventure?

Will you wilt under criticism, or will you follow your convictions?

Will you bluff it out when you're wrong, or will you apologize?

Will you guard your heart against rejection, or will you act when you fall in love?

Will you play it safe, or will you be a little bit swashbuckling?

When it's tough, will you give up, or will you be relentless?

Will you be a cynic, or will you be a builder?

Will you be clever at the expense of others, or will you be kind?

I will hazard a prediction. When you are 80 years old, and in a quiet moment of reflection narrating for only yourself the most personal version of your life story, the telling that will be most compact and

meaningful will be the series of choices you have made. In the end, we are our choices. Build yourself a great story. Thank you and good luck!

Elon Musk at California Institute of Technology

June 15, 2012

All right.

I'd like to thank you for leaving 'crazy person' out of the introduction.

So I thought — I was trying to think what's the most useful thing that I – what I can say that can actually be helpful and useful to you in the future.

And I thought, perhaps tell the story of how I sort of came to be here. How did these things happen? And maybe there are lessons there. I often find myself wondering, how did this happen.

When I was young, I didn't really know what I was going to do when I got older. People kept asking me. But then eventually, I thought the idea of inventing things would be really cool.

And the reason I thought that was because I read a quote from Arthur C. Clark which said that, "A sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." And that's really true.

If you go back say, 300 years, the things we take for granted today, you'd be burned at stake for. Being able to fly. That's crazy. Being able to see over long distances, being able to communicate, having effectively with the Internet as a group mind of sorts, and having access to all the world's information instantly from almost anywhere on the earth. This stuff that really would be magic – that would be considered magic in times past.

In fact, I think it actually goes beyond that, there are many things that we take for granted today that weren't even imagined in times past, that weren't even in the realm of magic. So it actually goes beyond that. So I thought, well if I can do some of those things – basically if I can advance technology, then that is like magic and that would be really cool.

I always had an existential crisis, because I was trying to figure out 'what does it all mean?' Like what's the purpose of things? And I came to the conclusion that if we can advance the knowledge of the world, if we can do things that expand the scope and scale of consciousness, then we're better able to ask the right questions and become more enlightened. And that's the only way forward.

So, I studied physics and business, because I figured in order to do a lot of these things you need to know how the universe works and you need to know how the economy works. And you also need to be able to bring a lot of people together to work with you to create something. Because it's very difficult to do something as individuals if it's a significant technology.

So, I originally came out to California to try to figure out how to improve the energy density of electric vehicles – basically to try to figure out if there was an advanced capacitor that could serve as an alternative to batteries. And that was in 1995.

That's also when the Internet started to happen. And I thought well I could either pursue this technology, where success may not be one of the possible outcomes, which is always tricky, or participate in the Internet and be part of it. So, I decided to drop out.

Fortunately, we're past graduation, so, I can't be accused of recommending that to you. And I did some Internet stuff, you know. I've done a few things here and there. One of which is PayPal.

Maybe it's helpful to say, one of the things that was important then in the creation of PayPal was how it started. Because initially – the initial thought with PayPal was to create a conglomeration of financial services, so if you have one place where all of your financial services needs could be seamlessly integrated and works smoothly.

And we had a little feature, which was through e-mail payments. Whenever we'd show the system off to someone, we'd show the hard part, which was the conglomeration of financial services, which is quite difficult to put together. Nobody was interested.

Then we showed people e-mail payments, which was quite easy and everybody was interested. So, I think it's important to take feedback from your environment. You want to be as closed-loop as possible.

So, we focused on e-mail payments and tried to make that work. And that's what really got things to take off. But, if we hadn't responded to what people said, then we probably would not have been successful. So, it's important to look for things like that and focus on them when you see them, and you correct your prior assumptions.

Going from PayPal, I thought well, what are some of the other problems that are likely to most affect the future of humanity? It really wasn't from the perspective of, 'what's the best way to make money,' which is okay, but, it was really 'what do I think is going to most affect the future of humanity.'

So the biggest terrestrial problem we've got is sustainable energy. But the production and consumption of energy in a sustainable manner. If we don't solve that in this century, we're in deep trouble.

And the other one being the extension of life beyond earth to make life multi-planetary. So that's the basis for — the latter is the basis for SpaceX and the former is the basis for Tesla and SolarCity.

When I started SpaceX, initially, I thought that well, there's no way one could start a rocket company. I wasn't that crazy. But, then, I thought, well, what is a way to increase NASA's budget? That was actually my initial goal. I thought well if we could do a low cost mission to Mars, Oasis, which would land with seeds in dehydrated nutrient gel, then hydrate them upon landing. And you'd have this great photo of green plants in a red background.

The public tends to respond to precedence and superlatives. And this would be the first life on Mars and the furthest life had ever traveled as far as we know.

And I thought well that would get people really excited and increase NASA's budget. So obviously the financial outcome from such a mission would probably be zero. So anything better than that was on the upside.

So, I went to Russia three times to look at buying a refurbished ICBM... because that was the best deal. And I can tell you it was very weird going there in late 2001-2002 going to the Russian rocket forces and saying 'I'd like to buy two of your biggest rockets, but you can keep the nukes.' That's a lot more. That was 10 years ago, I guess.

They thought I was crazy, but I did have money. So, that was okay.

After making several trips to Russia, I came to the conclusion that, my initial impression was wrong about – because my initial thought was, well, that there is not enough will to explore and expand beyond earth and have a Mars base, that kind of thing. That was wrong.

In fact, there's plenty of will, particularly in the United States. Because United States is a nation of explorers, so people who came here from other parts of the world. I think the United States is really a distillation of the spirit of human exploration. But if people think it's impossible, then well it's going to completely break the federal budget, then they're not going to do it.

So, after my third trip, I said, okay, what we really need to do here is try to solve the space transport problem and started SpaceX. And this was against the advice of pretty much everyone I talked to.

One friend made me watch a bunch of videos of rockets blowing up. Let me tell you he wasn't far wrong. It was tough going there in the beginning. Because I never built anything physical. I mean I built like a model rocket as a kid and that kind of thing. But I never had a company that built any physical. So, I had to figure out how to do all these things and bring together the right team of people.

And we did all that, and then, failed three times. It was tough, tough going.

Think about a rocket, the passing grade is 100%. And you don't get to actually test the rocket in the real environment that is going to be in. So, I think the best analogy for rocket engineers is, if you want to create a really complicated software, you can't run the software as an integrated whole, and you can't run it on the computer, it's intended to run on, but, the first time you run it on the computer, it must run with no bugs. That's basically the essence of it. So, we missed the mark there.

The first launch, I was picking up bits of rocket near the launch site. And we learned with each successive flight. And we were able to, eventually with the fourth flight in 2008, reach orbit. That was also with the last bit of money that we had. Thank goodness that happened. I think the saying is fourth time is the charm?

So, we got the Falcon 1 to orbit. And then, began to scale it up to the Falcon 9, with an order of magnitude more thrust, it's around a million pounds of thrust. We managed to get that to orbit, and then developed the Dragon spacecraft, which recently docked to the space station and returned to earth from the space station.

That was a white-knuckle event. It was a huge relief. I still can't believe it actually happened.

But there's lot more that must happen beyond for humanity to become a space ranked civilization and ultimately a multi-planet species. And that's something I think it's vitally important. And I hope that some of you will participate in that either at SpaceX or other companies. Because it's just really one of the most important things for the preservation and extension of consciousness.

It's worth noting that Earth has been around for 4 billion years, but civilization in terms of having writing has been about 10,000 years, and that's being generous.

So, it's really somewhat of a tenuous existence that civilization and consciousness has been on earth. And I'm actually fairly optimistic about the future of earth. So I don't want to people sort of have the wrong impression like we're all about to die. I think things will most likely be okay for a long time on earth. Not for sure, but, most likely.

But even if it's 99% likely, a 1% chance is still worth spending a fair bit of effort to ensure that we have — back up the biosphere, and planetary redundancy if you will. And I think it's really quite important.

And in order to do that, there's breakthrough that needs to occur which is to create a rapidly and completely reusable transport system to Mars, which is one of those things that's right on the borderline of impossible. But, that's the sort of the thing that we're going to try to achieve with SpaceX.

And then, on the Tesla front, the goal with Tesla was really to try to show what electric cars can do. Because people had the wrong impression, and we had to change people's perceptions of electric vehicle. Because they used to think of it as something that was slow and ugly, with low range, like a golf cart. So, that's why we created the Tesla Roadster, to show that it can be fast, attractive and long range.

And it's amazing how — even though you can show that something works on paper, and the calculations are very clear, until you actually have the physical object, and they can drive it, it doesn't really sink in for people. So that I think is something worth nothing.

If you're going to create a company, the first thing you should try to do is create a working prototype. Everything looks great on PowerPoint. You can make anything work on PowerPoint. If you have an actual demonstration article, even if it's in primitive form, that's much more effective in convincing people.

So we made the Tesla Roadster, and now we're coming out soon with model S, which is a 4-door sedan. Because we made the Tesla Roadster people said, 'Sure we always knew you could make a car like that, it's an expensive car and it's low volume and small and all that but can you make a real car?' Okay, fine, we're going to make that, too. So, that's coming out soon.

And so that's where things are and hopefully, there are lessons to be drawn there.

I think the overreaching point I want to make is you guys are the magicians of the 21st century, don't let anything hold you back. Imagination is the limit. Go out there and create some magic.

Thank you.

The Investors

Charlie Munger – 2007 – University of Southern California

Paul Tudor Jones – 2009 – Buckley School

Steve Jurvetson – 2010 – St. Mark's School of Texas

Peter Thiel – 2016 – Hamilton College

Robert Smith – 2019 – Morehouse College

If you know of any commencement speeches you think I'd like or have any thoughts on categories I've missed, please email at kevin@12mv2.com with the subject "Commencement Speeches you may like." Thank you!

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Charlie Munger at University of Southern California

May 13, 2007

Well, no doubt many of you are wondering why the speaker is so old. Well, the answer is obviously he hasn't died yet.

And why was the speaker chosen? Well, I don't know that either. I like to think that the development department had nothing to do with it. Whatever the reason I think it's very fitting that I'm sitting here because I see one crowd of faces in the rear not wearing robes, and I know, from having educated an army of descendants, who really deserves a lot of the honors that are being given are the people here upfront. The sacrifice and the wisdom and the value transfer that comes from one generation to the next can never be underrated.

And that gives me enormous pleasure as I look at this sea of Asian faces to my left. All my life I've admired Confucius. I like the idea of filial piety, the idea that there are values that are taught and duties that come naturally and all that should be passed on to the next generation. And you people who don't think there's anything in this idea, please note how fast these Asian faces are rising in American life. I think they have something.

All right, I scratched out a few notes and I'm going to try and just give an account of some ideas and attitudes that have worked well for me. I don't claim that they are perfect for everybody. Although I think many of them are pretty close to universal values and many of them are can't fail ideas.

What are the core ideas that have helped me?

Well, luckily, I got at a very early age the idea that the safest way to try and get what you want is to try and deserve what you want. It's such a simple idea. It's the golden rule so to speak. You want to deliver to the world what you would buy if you were on the other end. There is no ethos, in my opinion, that is better for any lawyer or any other person to have.

By and large, the people who have this ethos win in life and they don't win just money, just honors and emoluments. They win the respect, the deserved trust, of the people they deal with, and there is huge pleasure in life to be obtained from getting deserved trust. And so the way to get it is to deliver what you'd want to buy if the circumstances were reversed.

Occasionally, you find a perfect rogue of a person, who dies rich and widely known. But mostly, these people are fully understood by the surrounding civilization, and when the cathedral is full of people at the funeral ceremony, most of them are there to celebrate the fact that the person is dead.

And that reminds me of the story of the time when one of these people died and the minister said, "It's now time for someone to say something nice about the deceased."

And nobody came forward.

And nobody came forward.

And nobody came forward.

And finally one man came up and he said, "Well, his brother was worse."

That is not where you want to go! That's not the kind of funeral you want to have. You'll leave entirely the wrong example.

A second idea that I got very early was that there is no love that's so right as admiration-based love, and that love should include the instructive dead. Somehow, I got that idea and I lived with it all my life and it's been very very useful to me.

A love like that celebrated by Somerset Maugham and his book "Of Human Bondage"... that's a sick kind of love, it's a disease. And if you find yourself in a disease like that my advice to you is turn around and fix it. Eliminate it.

Another idea that I got, and this may remind you of Confucius too, is that wisdom acquisition is a moral duty. It's not something you do just to advance in life. Wisdom acquisition is a moral duty.

And there's a corollary to that proposition which is very important. It means that you're hooked for lifetime learning, and without lifetime learning you people are not going to do very well. You are not going to get very far in life based on what you already know. You're going to advance in life by what you're going to learn after you leave here.

If you take Berkshire Hathaway, which is certainly one of the best-regarded corporations in the world and may have the best long-term investment record in the entire history of civilization, the skill that got Berkshire through one decade would not have sufficed to get it through the next decade with the achievements made. Without Warren Buffett being a learning machine, a continuous learning machine, the record would have been absolutely impossible.

The same is true at lower walks of life. I constantly see people rise in life who are not the smartest, sometimes not even the most diligent, but they are learning machines. They go to bed every night a little wiser than when they got up and boy does that help—particularly when you have a long run ahead of you.

Alfred North Whitehead said it one time that "the rapid advance of civilization came only when man invented the method of invention" and, of course, he was referring to the huge growth of GDP per capita and all the other good things that we now take for granted, which started a few hundred years ago and before that all was stasis.

So, if civilization can progress only when it invents the method of invention, you can progress only when you learn the method of learning.

I was very lucky. I came to law school having learned the method of learning and nothing has served me better in my long life than continuous learning. And if you take Warren Buffett and watched him with a time clock, I would say half of all the time he spends is sitting on his ass and reading. And a big chunk of the rest of the time is spent talking one on one either on the telephone or personally with highly gifted people whom he trusts and who trust him. In other words, it looks quite academic, all this worldly success.

Academia has many wonderful values in it. I came across such a value not too long ago. It was several years ago, in my capacity as a hospital board chairman. I was dealing with a medical school academic. And this man over years of hard work had made himself know more about bone tumor pathology than almost anybody else in the world. And he wanted to pass this knowledge on to the rest of us.

And how was he going to do it? Well, he decided to write a textbook that would be very useful to other people. And I don't think a textbook like this sells two thousand copies if those two thousand copies are in all the major cancer centers in the world.

He took a year sabbatical, he sat down in front of his computer and he had all the slides because he saved them and organized them and filed them. He worked 17 hours a day, 7 days a week, for a year and that

was his sabbatical. At the end of the year, he had one of the great bone tumor pathology textbooks in the world. When you're around values like that, you want to pick up as much as you can.

Another idea that was hugely useful to me was that I listened in law school when some wag said, "A legal mind is a mind that when two things are all twisted up together and interacting, it's feasible to think responsibly about one thing and not the other."

Well, I could see from that one sentence that was perfectly ridiculous, and it pushed me further into my natural drift, which was into learning all the big ideas and all the big disciplines so I wouldn't be a perfect damn fool who was trying to think about one aspect of something that couldn't be removed from the totality of the situation in a constructive fashion. And what I noted, since the really big ideas carry 95 percent of the freight, it wasn't at all that hard for me to pick up all the big ideas and all the big disciplines and make them a standard part of my mental routines.

Once you have the ideas, of course, they are no good if you don't practice. You don't practice, you lose it.

So, I went through life constantly practicing this model of disciplinary approach. Well, I can't tell you what that's done for me. It's made life more fun. It's made me more constructive. It's made me more helpful to others. It's made me enormously rich. You name it, that attitude really helps.

Now there are dangers there, because it works so well, that if you do it, you will frequently find you are sitting in the presence of some other expert—maybe even an expert that's superior to you, supervising you—and you will know more than he does about his own specialty, a lot more. You will see the correct answer when he's missed it.

That is a very dangerous position to be in. You can cause enormous offense by helpfully being right in a way that causes somebody else to lose face. And I never found a perfect way to solve that problem. I was a great poker player when I was young, but I wasn't a good enough poker player so people failed to sense that I thought I knew more than they did about their subjects, and it gave a lot of offense. Now I'm just regarded as eccentric, but it was a difficult period to go through. And my advice to you is to learn sometimes to keep your light under a bushel.

One of my colleagues, also number one in his class in law school—a great success in life, worked for the supreme court, etc.—he knew a lot and he tended to show it as a very young lawyer and one day the senior partner called him in and said, "Listen, Chuck, I want to explain something to you. Your duty under any circumstances is to behave in such a way that the client thinks he's the smartest person in the world. If you have any little energy and insight available after that, use it to make your senior partner look like the smartest person in the world. And only after you've satisfied those two obligations do you want your light to shine at all."

Well, that may be very good advice for rising in a large firm. It wasn't what I did. I always obeyed the drift of my nature and if other people didn't like it I didn't need to be adored by everybody.

Another idea, and by the way, when I talk about this multidisciplinary attitude I'm really following a very key idea of the greatest lawyer of antiquity, Marcus Tullius Cicero. Cicero is famous for saying, "A man who doesn't know what happened before he was born goes through life like a child." That is a very correct idea of Cicero's. And he's right to ridicule somebody so foolish as not to know what happened before he was born.

But if you generalize Cicero as I think one should, there are all these other things that you should know in addition to history, and those other things are the big ideas in all the other disciplines. And it doesn't help

you just to know them enough just so you can prattle them back on an exam and get an A. You have to learn these things in such a way that they're in a mental latticework in your head and you automatically use them for the rest of your life.

If you do that, I solemnly promise you that one day you'll be walking down the street and look to your right and left and think, "My heavenly days! I'm now one of the few most competent people of my whole age forward." If you don't do it, many of the brightest of you will live in the middle ranks or in the shallows.

Another idea that I got—and it was encapsulated by that story the Dean recounted about the man who wanted to know where he was going to die and he wouldn't go there—that rustic let that idea have a profound truth in his hand.

The way complex adaptive systems work and the way mental constructs work; problems frequently get easier and I would even say usually are easier to solve if you turn around in reverse. In other words, if you want to help India, the question you should ask is not, "How can I help India?" You think, "What's doing the worst damage in India? What would automatically do the worst damage and how do I avoid it?"

You'd think they are logically the same thing, they're not. Those of you who have mastered algebra know that inversion frequently will solve problems which nothing else will solve. And in life, unless you're more gifted than Einstein, inversion will help you solve problems that you can't solve in other ways.

But to use a little inversion now, "What will really fail in life? What do you want to avoid?"

Such an easy answer: sloth and unreliability. If you're unreliable, it doesn't matter what your virtues are, you're going to crater immediately. So doing what you have faithfully engaged to do should be an automatic part of your conduct. You want to avoid sloth and unreliability.

Another thing I think should be avoided is extremely intense ideology because it cabbages up one's mind. You've seen that. You see a lot of it on TV. You know preachers, for instance, you know they've all got different ideas about theology and a lot of them have minds that are made of cabbage. But that can happen with political ideology. And if you're young, it's easy to drift into loyalties. And when you announce that you're a loyal member and you start shouting the orthodox ideology out, what you're doing is pounding it in, pounding it in, and you're gradually ruining your mind so you want to be very careful with this ideology. It's a big danger.

In my mind, I got a little example I use whenever I think about ideology and it's these Scandinavian canoeists who succeeded in taming all the rapids of Scandinavia and they thought they would tackle the whirlpools in the Aaron Rapids here in the United States. The death rate was 100 percent. A big whirlpool is not something you want to go into and I think the same is true about a really deep ideology.

I have what I call an "iron prescription" that helps me keep sane when I naturally drift toward preferring one ideology over another. And that is I say, "I'm not entitled to have an opinion on this subject unless I can state the arguments *against* my position better than the people do who are supporting it." I think only when I reach that stage am I qualified to speak.

Now, you can say that's too much of an iron discipline. It's not too much of an iron discipline. It's not even that hard to do. It sounds a lot like the iron prescription of Ferdinand the Great, "It's not necessary to hope in order to persevere." That probably is too tough for most people. I don't think it's too tough for me, but it's too tough for most people.

But this business of not drifting into extreme ideology is a very very important thing in life if you want to have more correct knowledge and be wiser than other people. A heavy ideology is very likely to do you in.

Another thing, of course, that does one in is the self-serving bias to which we are all subject. You think that your little me is entitled to do what it wants to do and, for instance, why shouldn't the true little me overspend my income?

Well, there once was a man who became the most famous composer in the world, but he was utterly miserable most of the time and one of the reasons was he always overspent his income. That was Mozart. If Mozart can't get by with this kind of asinine conduct, I don't think you should try it.

Generally speaking, envy, resentment, revenge, and self-pity are disastrous modes of thought. Self-pity gets pretty close to paranoia and paranoia is one of the very hardest things to reverse. You do not want to drift into self-pity.

I have a friend who carried a big stack of linen cards about this thick, and when somebody would make a comment that reflected self-pity, he would take out one of the cards, take the top one off the stack and hand it to the person, and the card said, "Your story has touched my heart. Never have I heard of anyone with as many misfortunes as you."

Well, you can say that's waggery, but I suggest that every time you find you're drifting into self-pity—I don't care what the cause, your child could be dying of cancer, self-pity is not going to improve the situation—just give yourself one of those cards. It's a ridiculous way to behave and when you avoid it you get a great advantage over everybody else, almost everybody else, because self-pity is a standard condition and yet you can train yourself out of it.

And, of course, a self-serving bias, you want to get out of yourself: thinking that what's good for you is good for the wider civilization and rationalizing all these ridiculous conclusions based on the subconscious tendency to serve one's self. It's a terribly inaccurate way to think and, of course, you want to drive that out of yourself because you want to be wise, not foolish.

You also have to allow for the self-serving bias of everybody else, because most people are not gonna remove it all that successfully, the only condition being what it is. If you don't allow for self-serving bias in your conduct, again, you're a fool.

I watched the brilliant Harvard Law Review-trained general counsel of Salomon lose his career. And what he did was, when the CEO was aware some underling had done something wrong, the general counsel said, "Gee, we don't have any legal duty to report this, but I think it's what we should do. It's our moral duty."

Of course, the general counsel was totally correct, but, of course, it didn't work. It was a very unpleasant thing for the CEO to do and he put it off and put it off and, of course, everything eroded into a major scandal and down went the CEO and the general counsel with him.

The correct answer in situations like that was given by Ben Franklin. He said, "If you want to persuade, appeal to interest not to reason." The self-serving bias is so extreme. If the general counsel said, "Look, this is going to erupt. It's something that will destroy you, take away your money, take away your status. It's a perfect disaster." It would have worked! You want to appeal to interest. You want to do it of lofty motives, but you should not avoid appealing to interest.

Another thing: perverse incentives. You don't want to be in a perverse incentive system that's causing you to behave more and more foolishly or worse and worse. Incentives are too powerful a controller of human cognition and human behavior, and one of the things you are going to find in some modern law firms is billable hour quotas and I could not have lived under a billable hour quota of 2,400 hours a year. That would have caused serious problems for me. I wouldn't have done it and I don't have a solution for you for that. You have to figure it out for yourself, but it's a significant problem.

And you particularly want to avoid working directly under somebody you really don't admire and don't want to be like. It's very dangerous. We're all subject to control to some extent by authority figures—particularly authority figures that are rewarding us. And that requires some talent.

The way I solved that is I figured out the people I did admire and I maneuvered cleverly, without criticizing anybody, so I was working entirely under people I admired. And a lot of law firms will permit that if you're shrewd enough to work it out. And your outcome in life will be way more satisfactory and way better if you work under people you really admire. The alternative is not a good idea.

Objectivity maintenance. Well, we all remember that Darwin paid special attention to disconfirming evidence, particularly to disconfirm something he believed and loved. Well, objectivity maintenance routines are totally required in life if you're going to be a correct thinker. And they were talking about Darwin's attitude—special attention to the disconfirming evidence—and also to checklist routines. Checklist routines avoid a lot of errors. You should have all this elementary wisdom and then you should go through and have a checklist in order to use it. There is no other procedure that will work as well.

A last idea that I found very important is I realized very early that non-egalitarianism would work better in the parts of the world I wanted to inhabit. What do I mean by non-egalitarianism? I mean John Wooden, when he was the number one basketball coach in the world. He just said to the bottom five players, "You don't get to play. You're sparring partners."

The top seven did all the playing. Well, the top seven learned more—remember the learning machine—because they were doing all the playing. And when he got to that system, why, Wooden won more than he'd ever won before.

I think the game of life, in many respects, is getting a lot of practice into the hands of the people that have the most aptitude to learn and the most tendency to be learning machines. And if you want the very highest reaches of human civilization, that's where you have to go. You do not want to choose a brain surgeon for your child among fifty applicants, all of them just take turns during the procedure. You don't want your airplanes designed that way. You don't want your Berkshire Hathaway's run that way. You want to get the power into the right people.

I frequently tell the story of Max Planck, when he won the Nobel prize and went around Germany giving lectures on quantum mechanics. And the chauffeur gradually memorized the lecture and he said, "Would you mind, professor Planck, just because it's so boring staying in our routines, would you mind if I gave the lecture this time and you just sat in front with my chauffeur's hat?" And Planck said, "Sure."

And the chauffeur got up and he gave this long lecture on quantum mechanics, after which a physics professor stood up in the rear and asked a perfectly ghastly question. And the chauffeur said, "Well, I'm surprised that in an advanced city like Munich I get such an elementary question. I'm going to ask my chauffeur to reply."

Well, the reason I tell that story is not entirely to celebrate the quick wittiness of the protagonist. In this world, we have two kinds of knowledge. One is Planck knowledge—the people who really know. They've paid the dues, they have the aptitude.

Then, we've got chauffeur knowledge—they have learned to prattle the talk and they have a big head of hair. They may have fine timbre in the voice. They really make a hell of an impression. But in the end, they've got chauffeur knowledge. I think I've just described practically every politician in the United States.

And you are going to have the problem in your life of getting the responsibility to the people with the Planck knowledge and away for the people who have the chauffeur knowledge. And there are huge forces working against you.

My generation has failed you to some extent. We are delivering to you, in California, a legislature where only the certified nuts from the left and the certified nuts from the right are allowed to serve and none of them are removable. That's what my generation has done for you, but you wouldn't like it to be too easy would you?

Another thing that I found is an intense interest of the subject is indispensable if you are really going to excel. I could force myself to be fairly good in a lot of things, but I couldn't be really good in anything where I didn't have an intense interest. So, to some extent, you're going to have to follow me. If at all feasible you want to drift into doing something in which you really have a natural interest.

Another thing you have to do, of course, is have a lot of assiduity. I like that word because it means "sit down in your ass until you do it."

I've had marvelous partners all my life. I think I got them partly because I tried to deserve them and, partly, because I was wise enough to select them and, partly, maybe it was some luck. But two partners that I chose for one little phase of my life had the following rule and they created a little design-build construction team. And they sat down and said, "Two-man partnership. Divide everything equally. Here's the rule: Whenever we're behind in our commitments to other people, we will both work 14 hours a day until we're caught up."

Well, needless to say, that firm didn't fail! The people died rich. It's such a simple idea.

Another thing, of course, is life will have terrible blows, horrible blows, unfair blows. Doesn't matter. And some people recover and others don't. And there I think the attitude of Epictetus is the best. He thought that every mischance in life was an opportunity to behave well. Every mischance in life was an opportunity to learn something and your duty was not to be submerged in self-pity, but to utilize the terrible blow in a constructive fashion. That is a very good idea.

And you may remember the epitaph which Epictetus left for himself: "Here lies Epictetus, a slave, maimed in body, the ultimate in poverty, and favored of the gods."

Well, that's the way Epictetus is now remembered. He said big consequences. And he was favorite of the Gods! He was favored because he became wise, and he became manly. Very good idea.

I got a final little idea because I'm all for prudence as well as opportunism. My grandfather was the only federal judge in his city for nearly forty years and I really admired him. I'm his namesake. And I'm Confucian enough that, even now, I sit here and I'm saying, "Well, Judge Munger would be pleased to see me here."

So I'm Confucian enough, all these years after my grandfather is dead, to carry the torch for my grandfather's values. And, grandfather Munger was a federal judge at a time when there were no pensions for widows of federal judges. So if he didn't save from his income, why, my grandmother would have been in penury. And being the kind of man he was he underspent his income all his life and left her in comfortable circumstances.

Along the way, in the thirties, my uncle's bank failed and couldn't reopen. And my grandfather saved the bank by taking over a third of his assets—good assets—and putting them into the bank and taking the horrible assets in exchange. And, of course, it did save the bank.

While my grandfather took a loss, he got most of his money back eventually. But I've always remembered the example. And so when I got to college and I came across Houseman, I remember the little poem from Houseman, and that went something like this:

*“The thoughts of others
Were light and fleeting,
Of lovers' meeting
Or luck or fame.
Mine were of trouble,
And mine were steady;
So I was ready
When trouble came.”*

You can say, “Who wants to go through life anticipating trouble?” Well, I did! All my life, I've gone through life anticipating trouble. And here I am, well along on my eighty-fourth year, and like Epictetus, I've had a favored life. It didn't make me unhappy to anticipate trouble all the time and be ready to perform adequately if trouble came. It didn't hurt me at all. In fact, it helped me. So I quick claim to you Houseman and Judge Munger.

The last idea that I want to give you, as you go out into a profession that frequently puts a lot of procedure, and a lot of precautions, and a lot of mumbo-jumbo into what it does, this is not the highest form which civilization can reach. The highest form that civilization can reach is a seamless web of deserved trust. Not much procedure, just totally reliable people correctly trusting one another.

That's the way an operating room works at the Mayo Clinic. If a bunch of lawyers were to introduce a lot of process, the patients would all die. So never forget, when you're a lawyer, that you may be rewarded for selling this stuff, but you don't have to buy it. In your own life, what you want is a seamless web of deserved trust. And if your proposed marriage contract has forty-seven pages, my suggestion is you not enter.

Well, that's enough for one graduation. I hope these ruminations of an old man are useful to you. In the end, I'm like the Old Valiant-for-Truth in The Pilgrim's Progress: “My sword I leave to him who can wear it.”

Paul Tudor Jones at Buckley School

June 10, 2009

Perfect Failure

When I was asked to give the commencement address to a graduating class of 9th graders, I jumped at the chance. You see, I have four teenagers of my own and I feel like this is the point in my life when I am supposed to tell them something profound. So thank you Buckley community for giving me this opportunity. I tried this speech out on them last night and am happy to report that none of them fell asleep until I was three quarters done.

When composing this message I searched my memory for my same experience back in 1969 when I was sitting right where you are. I realized that I could hardly remember one single speaker from my junior high or high school days. Now that could be my age. I'm old enough now that some days I can't remember how old I am. But it could also have been a sign of the times. Remember, I was part of the student rebellion, and we did not listen to anything that someone over 30 said because they were just too clueless. Or so we thought.

Anyway, as I sat there considering this speech further, I suddenly had a flashback of the one speaker who I actually did remember from youthful days. He was a Shakespearean actor who came to our school to extol the virtues of Shakespeare. He started out by telling us that Shakespeare was not about poetry or romance or love, but instead, was all about battle, and fighting and death and war. Then he pulled out a huge sword which he began waving over the top of his head as he described various bloody conflicts that were all part and parcel of Shakespeare's plays. Now being a 15-year old testosterone laden student at an all boys school, I thought this was pretty cool. I remember thinking, "Yea, this guy gets it. Forget about the deep meaning and messages in the words, let's talk about who's getting the blade."

As you can see, I have a similar sword which I am going to stop waving over my head now, because A) I think you are permanently scarred, and B) the headmaster looks like he is about to tackle me and C) some of you, I can tell, are way too excited about this sword, and you're scaring me a little.

I'm here with you young men today because your parents wanted me to speak to you about service—that is, serving others and giving back to the broader community for the blessings that you have received in your life. But that is a speech for a later time in your life. Don't get me wrong, serving others is really, really important. It truly is the secret to happiness in life. I swear to God. Money won't do it. Fame won't do it. Nor will sex, drugs, homeruns or high achievement. But now I am getting preachy.

Today, I want to talk to you about the dirtiest word that any of you 9th graders know. It's a word that is so terrible that your parents won't talk about it; your teachers won't talk about it; and you certainly don't ever want to dwell on it. But this is a preparatory school, and you need to be prepared to deal with this phenomenon because you will experience it. That is a guarantee. Every single one of you will experience it not once but multiple times, and every adult in this room has had to deal with this in its many forms and manifestations. It's the "F" word.

FAILURE. Failure that is so mortifying and so devastating that it makes you try to become invisible. It makes you want to hide your face, your soul, your being from everyone else because of the shame. Trust me, boys—if you haven't already tasted that, you will. I am sure most of you here already have. AND IT IS HARD. I know this firsthand, but I also know that failure was a key element to my life's journey.

My first real failure was in 1966 in the 6th grade. I played on our basketball team, and I was the smallest and youngest kid on the team. It was the last game of the season and I was the only player on the squad that had not scored a point all season. So in the second half the coach directed all the kids to throw me the ball when I went in, and for me to shoot so that I would score. The problem was that Coach Clark said it loud enough that every person in the stands could hear it as well as every member of the opposing team. Going into the fourth quarter, our team was well ahead, Coach Clark inserted me and thus, began the worst eight minutes of my life up until that point. Every time I got the ball, the entire other team would rush towards me, and on top of that, that afternoon I was the greatest brick layer the world had ever seen. The game ended. I had missed five shots, and the other team erupted in jubilation that I had not scored. I ran out of the gym as fast as I could only to bump into two of the opposing team's players who proceeded to laugh and tease and ridicule me. I cried and hid in the bathroom. Well, that passed, and I kept trying team sports, but I was just too small to really compete. So in the 10th grade, I took up boxing where suddenly everyone was my size and weight. I nearly won the Memphis Golden Gloves my senior year in high school and did win the collegiate championship when I was 19. Standing in the middle of that ring and getting that trophy, I still remember looking around for those two little kids who had run me into that bathroom back in the 6th grade, because I was going to knock their blocks off. That's one problem with failure. It can stay with you for a very long time.

The next time the dragon of failure reared his ugly head was in 1978. I was working in New Orleans for one of the greatest cotton traders of all time, Eli Tullis. Now, New Orleans is an unbelievable city. It has the Strawberry Festival, the Jazz Festival, the Sugar Bowl, Mardi Gras, and just about every other excuse for a party that you can ever imagine. Heck, in that town, waking up was an excuse to party. I was still pretty fresh out of college, and my mentality, unfortunately, was still firmly set on fraternity row. It was a Friday morning in June, and I had been out literally all night with a bunch of my friends. My job was to man the phone all day during trading hours and call cotton prices quotes from New York into Mr. Tullis' office. Around noon, things got quiet on the New York floor, and I got overly drowsy. The next thing I remember was a ruler prying my chin off my chest, and Mr. Tullis calling to me, "Paul. Paul." My eyes fluttered opened and as I came to my senses, he said to me, "Son, you are fired." I'd never been so shocked or hurt in my life. I literally thought I was going to die for I had just been sacked by an iconic figure in my business.

My shame turned into anger. I was not angry at Mr. Tullis for he was right. I was angry at myself. But I knew I was not a failure, and I swore that I was going to prove to myself that I could be a success. I called a friend and secured a job on the floor of the New York Cotton Exchange and moved to the City. Today, I will put my work ethic up against anybody's on Wall Street. Failure will give you a tattoo that will stay with you your whole life, and sometimes it's a really good thing. One other side note, to this day, I've never told my parents that I got fired. I told them I just wanted to try something different. Shame can be a lifetime companion for which you better prepare yourself.

Now, there are two types of failure you will experience in life. The first type is what I just described and comes from things you can control. That is the worst kind. But there is another form of failure that will be equally devastating to you, and that is the kind beyond your control. This happened to me in 1982. I had met a very lovely young Harvard student from Connecticut, dated her for two years then asked her to marry me right after she graduated from college. We set a date; we sent out the invitations; and all was fantastic until one month before the wedding when her father called me. He said, "Paul, my daughter sat me down this afternoon, and she doesn't know how to tell you this, but she is really unhappy and thinks it's time for you two to take a break." At first I thought he was joking because he was a very funny guy. Then he said, "No, she is serious about this." I thought to myself, "Oh, my God, I am being dumped at the

altar.” I’m from Tennessee. Getting dumped at the altar was the supreme social embarrassment of that time. It was a big deal. When all my family and friends found out, they were ready to re-start the Civil War on the spot. I had to remind them that the last Civil War didn’t go so well for our side, and I didn’t like our chances in a rematch. The reality was that I was a 26-year old knucklehead, and since all my friends were getting married, I kind of felt it was time for me to do the same thing. And that was the worst reason in the world to get married. I actually think she understood that and to a certain extent spared me what would have been a very tough marriage. Instead, I’ve had an incredible marriage for twenty years to a wonderful wife, and we have four kids that I love more than anything on Earth. Some things happen to you that at the time will make you feel like the world is coming to an end, but in actuality, there is a very good reason for it. You just can’t see it and don’t know it. When one door closes, another will open, but standing in that hallway can be hell. You just have to persevere. Quite often that dragon of failure is really chasing you off the wrong road and on to the right one.

By now you are thinking, how much longer is this loser going to keep on talking. My kids are all teenagers, and whenever I’m telling them something I think is important, they often wonder the same thing. But the main point I want you to take away today is that some of your greatest successes are going to be the children of failure. This touches upon the original reason I was invited here today. In 1986, I adopted a class of Bedford Stuyvesant 6th graders and promised them if they graduated from high school, I would pay for their college. For those of you who don’t know, Bed-Stuy is one of New York City’s toughest neighborhoods. Even the rats are scared to go there at night. Statistically about 8% of the class I adopted would graduate from high school, so my intervention was designed to get them all into college. For the next six years, I did everything I could for them. I spent about \$5,000 annually per student taking them on ski trips, taking them to Africa, taking them to my home in Virginia on the weekends, having report card night, hiring a counselor to help coordinate afternoon activities and doing my heartfelt best to get them ready for college. Six years later, a researcher from Harvard contacted me and asked if he could study my kids as part of an overall assessment of what then was called the “I Have a Dream” Program. I said sure. He came back to me a few months later and shared some really disturbing statistics. 86 kids that I had poured my heart and soul into for six years were statistically no different than kids from a nearby school that did not have the services our afterschool program provided. There was no difference in graduation rates, dropout rates, academic scores, teenage pregnancies, and the list went on. The only thing that we managed to do was get three times as many of our kids into college because we were offering scholarships whereas the other schools were not. But in terms of preparing these kids for college, we completely and totally failed. Boy, did this open my eyes. That was the first real-time example for me of how intellectual capital will always trump financial capital. In other words, I had the money to help these kids, but it was useless because I didn’t have the brains to help them. I had tried to succeed with sheer force of will and energy and financial resources. I learned that this was not enough. What I needed were better defined goals, better metrics, and most importantly, more efficient technologies that would enable me to achieve those goals. What that whole experience taught me was that starting with kids at age 12 was 12 years too late. An afterschool program was actually putting a band-aid on a much deeper structural issue, and that was that our public education system was failing us. So in 2000, along with the greatest educator I knew, a young man named Norman Atkins, we started the Excellence Charter School in Bedford Stuyvesant for boys. We set the explicit goal of hiring the best teachers with the greatest set of skills to be the top performing school in the city. Now that was an ambitious goal but last year in 2008, Excellence ranked #1 out of 543 public schools in New York City for reading and math proficiency for any third and fourth grade cohort, and our school was 98% African American boys. We never would have done that had I not failed almost 15 years earlier.

So here is the point: you are going to meet the dragon of failure in your life. You may not get into the school you want or you may get kicked out of the school you are in. You may get your heart broken by the girl of your dreams or God forbid, get into an accident beyond your control. But the point is that everything happens for a reason. At the time it may not be clear. And certainly the pain and the shame are going to be overwhelming and devastating. But just as sure as the sun comes up, there will come a time on the next day or the next week or the next year, when you will grab that sword and point it at that dragon and tell him, "Begone, dragon. Tarry with me and I will cut your head off. For I must find the destination God and life hold in store for me!"

Young men of Buckley, good luck on your journey...

Steve Jurvetson at St. Mark's School of Texas

May 21, 2010

Thank you Mr. Holtberg, and thank you J.T. Sutcliffe, Steve Seay, and all of the teachers that made my life path possible.

Not so long ago, I was sitting in those seats where you are today. I was a bit insecure and social awkward – in short, a young budding geek. It took me a few years to embrace that identity. And I'll try to share some of that excitement tonight.

It is a great honor to be up here with you, and preparing for my talk was quite daunting. My first thought was to reflect on *my* commencement speaker, and frankly, I could not recall a single thing that he said. I think I was a bit distracted at the time, and hoped he would just get on with it. So, in case the same thing happens tonight, and you don't remember a single word that I say, I hope to leave you with something. The view here from the podium is breathtaking. [takes out disposable camera] So, smile. [takes photo] Wait... someone blinked. [takes photo again]. Perfect. I will post this on Flickr tonight so you have something to take away from this evening.

And although I am facing your families from this podium, I am addressing my comments to you.

So, what perspective can I share with you today?

I work in venture capital, which is a great career choice for people with short attention spans. We invest in startup companies founded by bold entrepreneurs who want to change the world. Much like many of you.

I get to live vicariously through their successes, and it allows me to surf the frontiers of the unknown, as these bold scientists and businesspeople forge the future, time and time again.

I get to hear the pitches of Hotmail, Skype, SpaceX, Tesla Motors and other great companies, back when they are a gleam in the eye of the entrepreneur.

I will try to share some of their stories, as well as my own.

At St. Mark's, I was a computer programming hobbyist, then became a chip designer at HP, then a management consultant, then a product marketing intern at Apple, and finally a venture capitalist investing in entrepreneurs starting new companies in the Internet, then nanotechnology, then energy, cleantech and synthetic biology. It's like my career path has ADD.

But had I stopped at any of the earlier branches, I may have never found my true calling – when fortune taps you figuratively on the shoulder and allows you to do something special. To find your calling in life is priceless.

But, there also comes a time when you look back on your life as an adult and you realize that all the myriad potentials that you envisioned as a child, your life has tracked a path of progressive narrowing.

This observation was actually by Henry Kissinger, in the opening of his undergrad thesis. He was just a few years older than you, and he was already this depressingly mature!

Remember, as a child, when you dreamed of being an astronaut, or fireman, or racecar driver. I hope Kissinger's warning will not be your fate.

In many ways, college should further open your field of view. The tree branches again and the child-like rush of myriad horizons opens anew.

Embrace something new. Explore the world. There will be plenty of time to iterate and execute as you age.

Unfortunately, most workplaces plunge us into deep mental ruts. They reward competencies that are self-reinforcing rather than diversifying, and they encourage people to acquire domain expertise instead of continuing to ask stupid questions and learn new things. We need to find our way out of these ruts, rediscover and rekindle the creativity that many of us left behind in childhood.

Whether by hobbies, or a career that rewards diversity, you have to make a determined effort to keep that part of yourself alive, but the payoff is a keener, more nimble intellect.

In short, celebrate the child-like mind.

Geeks like me do this naturally.

From what I can see, the best scientists and engineers nurture a child-like mind, even the greats, like Newton, Feynman and Einstein. They are playful, open-minded, and unrestrained by the inner voice of reason, collective cynicism, or fear of failure. Why do I say “child-like” mind? Alison Gopnik writes in her book *Scientist in the Crib* (which I recommend to any geek about to have a child): “Babies are just plain smarter than we are, at least if being smart means being able to learn something new... They think, draw conclusions, make predictions, look for explanations and even do experiments... In fact, scientists are successful precisely because they emulate what children do naturally.”

Of course, they lack wisdom and experience, but they are amazing learning machines.

Much of the human brain’s power derives from its massive synaptic interconnectivity. When you were 2 to 3 years old, you had 10x the synapses and 2x the energy burn in your brain than you do today. And it’s all downhill from there.

The human experience of cognitive development is that our capability peaks in the teen years, holds steady into our late thirties, and then begins a gradual straight-line downward slope that continues until we die. It’s the rare individual who—by chance or good fortune—can orchestrate a life around pursuits that provide regular mental exercise capable of combatting that slope.

At one time it was thought that we are born with a fixed number of neurons that die off gradually over the course of our lives, never to be replenished. That’s now understood to be emphatically wrong. Although you can’t regrow an entire brain from serious injury, new synaptic connections are being formed all the time. This phenomenon is called neuroplasticity. Through cognitive exercise, you can dial up or down the rate of rewiring. Physical exercise is repetitive; mental exercise is eclectic.

As we extend human lifespan with each passing decade, we expose the weak evolutionary link – our brains were not built to last that long. In the not too distant future, we will look back and marvel that we thought we could stay mentally fit without mental exercise any better than we could stay physically fit without physical exercise.

Now I realize that for boys your age, about to experience collegiate life for the first time, it may be dangerous and downright reckless to suggest you fully embrace immaturity. I am referring only to cognitive curiosity. As for your physical health and safety, my only advice to you is that if you find

yourself encircled by a crowd chanting “Do it! Do it!” it is almost always a good idea *not* to do whatever it is.

Lifelong learning is especially critical in a rapidly changing world. Not surprisingly, adult re-education is a booming market.

So, what might you consider?

Consider public speaking. It is a learned skill, not an innate ability. I credit my years of debate at St. Mark’s for my ability to stand here before you today without completely freaking out.

And it has been my observation that the people that rise to the top of any organization – from companies to non-profits to politics – are good public speakers.

Consider computer science. I recently learned that most of the CS majors at Stanford had no prior programming experience. When they were deciding between Econ and Poli-Sci, they discovered CS. So it’s not too late to become a fine geek.

But, most importantly, explore a bit at college. This is especially true for those of you who already know what you want to major in.

One reason to consider this: the world is increasingly interdisciplinary. The critical advances that will change the world are more likely to come from the interstices between academic disciplines than from the purist’s pursuit of a traditional discipline like physics or chemistry.

The most rapidly growing engineering major today is bio-engineering, exploring the intersection of formerly discrete domains.

We may agree that innovation is important. It increasingly determines the fate of companies, industries and nations; it changes the context of our lives, and is a cause for optimism.

Yes, innovation is important, yet it seems so random. So, let’s talk about that for a moment.

Let me pose a question to each of you: What is the most important company 20 years from now/ Think of a specific company, and if you are not into companies much, think of the most important person 20 years from now.

I would bet even money that nobody assembled here today is correct. Not because I know the company’s name, but because that company does not have a name yet. It does not exist today.

Looking in retrospect makes it more coherent and comprehensible that the future belongs to the new, the entrepreneur, the new entrant. Looking in retrospect, Google did not exist 20 years ago.

Entrepreneurs change the world, always have. You are the leaders of the next wave of important companies, the ones that will disrupt business as usual. Consider the billion-dollar creations of the recent past: Microsoft, Dell, Apple, Google, Facebook. What do they all have in common?

They were all started by students – most of them teenagers. You are not too young to dream of greatness.

Okay, but what great new idea will change the world? Imagine we all voted on a parade of startup ideas, any selection of the 50 thousand startups that send us business plans each year. You would not want to bet on the winner of that popular vote. Instead I would look to the ideas that most people ridicule – yet a handful of you defend passionately.

In retrospect, the companies that change the world are generally considered a bad idea at their founding. eBay, Hotmail, Google, Skype – they were all dismissed by most investors before they got going.

So when you first think about doing something entrepreneurial, let me give you this advice. If everyone thinks your idea is a good, one, it is not disruptive enough to change the world. If most people laugh at your or say it will never work, and a handful think it is brilliant, you may be on to something. If nobody agrees with you, you are probably wrong. Sometimes you just have to admit that.

And when it comes to finding innovation in an organization, leaders can tune process of innovation more than they can hope to dictate the product of innovation. Just like evolution.

Why? Unpredictable events increasingly rule our world. These are called Black Swan events, and they make sense in retrospect, but nobody saw them coming – like Google and eBay before they become Google and eBay.

Part of the back-story is that technological change has been growing exponentially throughout history. Some of you are familiar with Moore's Law; the co-founder of Intel noticed that microprocessors were doubling in power every year, yet costing the same. Perhaps you take that for granted when buying a new computer.

Moore's Law was pretty important to the computer and communications industries... and over time, as formerly lab sciences became information sciences, Moore's Law innervates other industries from biotech to cleantech, bringing them to the pace of change of the information age. This disrupts a lot of cozy businesses that have not seen much innovation for decades. And this non-linear pace of change is a perpetual source of disruption, and creating wave after wave of opportunities for new entrants.

Just think of the Apple iPod. Back when I was your age, I cherished my Sony Walkman. You may not have heart of it, but it played music from a tape. Everyone had one, and if you can imagine it, when it came to portable music – there was one brand everyone knew – Sony. You would think that Sony would have seen the curves on disc drive and flash memory pricing and seen the impending transition to tape. But it took a new entrant to the portable music market, Apple Computer, to change the world.

While most people think of Moore's Law as something unique to the modern integrated circuit, it is actually merely a refraction of much longer-term trend spanning over a century. When cast as computational power or storage density – the features that customers actually care about – then one can look at the longer-term trend spanning multiple generations of compute technology, from mechanical calculators through vacuum tubes and discrete electronics. Moore's Law continues unwaveringly for 110 years, and it's completely exogenous to the economy. The Great Depression and all of the recessions have no impact on its long-term trajectory. Scientists do not rest during a recession.

We use the tools from one generation to build the next, and this is true for all of technology. In fact it's true for all innovation. Brian Arthur of the SFI (Santa Fe Institute) argues every invention is a novel combination of prior inventions. So over time, the combinatorial possibility space for new inventions grows exponentially. It is not just exogenous to economic swings, these inventions create the economy, and the economic growth that we cherish.

When you look at all the areas of accelerating change in technology and roll them up, there is a simple summary to remember: Today, 20 years of technological progress will be equivalent to the entire 20th century. In other words the 20 years taking us to 2020 will equal the past 100.

For most of us, who do not recall what life was like at the prior turn of the century, the metaphor is a bit abstract. In 1900, in the U.S., there were only 144 miles of paved road, and most Americans (94%+) were born at home, without a telephone, and never graduated high school. Most (86%+) did not have a bathtub at home or reliable access to electricity. Consider how much technology-driven change has compounded over the past century, and consider that an equivalent amount of progress will occur in one human generation, by 2020 – by the time your career is likely to be at its Zenith!

Exponential progress perpetually pierces the linear presumptions of our intuition, and shrinks our forecast horizons. “Future Shock” is no longer on an inter-generational time-scale. For a current example, think of genetics.

To do that, let me tell you a story about a great entrepreneur and innovator. I have the great honor to have helped in the formation of a company called Synthetic Genomics, run by Craig Venter. He has been on a 15-year quest to create a synthetic life form, and yesterday, you may have noticed that he succeeded.

Venter was the first to sequence the human genome, relying on the prediction of Moore’s Law that compute power would reach a critical threshold at the critical time to be able to reassemble the complete genome from random overlapping fragments – a computational challenge. The technique is called shotgun sequencing because the DNA is blasted apart through a nebulizer, much like a perfume spray nozzle. He saw in advance that this method would beat the government research techniques and that 90% of the work would take place in the last months of a 10-year endeavor.

But he did not rest on his laurels. He set off on an ocean voyage around the world, sampling seawater every 200 miles to shotgun sequence the entire ecosystem of millions of bacteria and viruses in one shot. Instead of separating out the organisms in advance, he realized that compute power was enough now to digitally reassemble the genes across all of the sampled organisms – millions of them in each milliliter of seawater. He found incredible diversity out there in the open oceans, and in one year grew the number of known genes on the planet 10x and the number of genes associated with energy harvesting by 100x (these are the genes for chlorophyll, rhodopsins and the like).

He did not stop there. Venter and his team recently succeeded in creating the world’s first artificial life form, with 100% of its DNA built up in the lab from beakers of chemicals, heralding an era of intelligent design in biology, where one writes the code of life as if it were a computer program, and the software creates its own hardware. To start, they email a file with the code for the A, T, G, and Cs to various labs that synthesize DNA strands 10 to 30 letters long. Venter’s team then stitches the strands together, using yeast in some cases, to build up an artificial chromosome millions of letters long, full of watermarks and famous quotes.

Again, looking at the curves of exponential progress, one could predict that a virus-scale strand of DNA would be feasible in 2002 and bacterial-scale by 2010.

But would it boot up to life?

Venter’s team took a microbial cell and swapped out 100% of its DNA with their new synthesized batch, and trillions of offspring later, the cells fully converted from one species to another, a complete change of phenotype. It is like genetic alchemy.

As Venter said during the announcement yesterday, “this is the first living, reproducing species on Earth whose parents are a computer.”

The point of the exercise is to dramatically improve the pace of progress in biotech, with early application in rapid vaccine construction, and mid-term applications in energy and cleantech. These microbes can recycle CO₂ and various wastes into fuels, chemicals, and clean water.

And instead of slowly splicing physical genes, as we have historically had to do in biotech, scientists can now create billions of genetically novel microbes per day. This will disrupt the fuels and chemicals industry.

Realize that teenagers are also experimenting with this brave new world of synthetic biology. At the International Genetically Engineered Machines (IGEM) competition, teenagers are reprogramming *E. Coli* bacteria to be logic gates, arsenic sensors, symbiotic therapeutics, and photographic biofilms – what I like to call an *E. Colaroid*. For these teenagers, reprogramming the information systems of biology is not so different from playing with LEGO blocks.

With the example of Craig Venter, I hope you see that entrepreneurs change the world – sometimes many times over. Consider also Elon Musk, who cofounded PayPal. Then SpaceX, which is building the successor to the Space Shuttle. Then Tesla Motors, the pioneer in electric cars, a company that is registered to go public, and would be the first U.S. car company to do since Henry Ford.

Craig Venter, Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, and entrepreneurs like them are our true national heroes. It is not our sports stars or entertainers.

What drives them is actually a *universal* human quest. We *all* strive by symbolic immortality – to leave something important behind after our short time on this Earth. Entrepreneurs create companies that outlast themselves, sometimes literally carrying on their name like Hewlett and Packard. Some create everlasting works of art or philanthropic acts of kindness. For many, we also find expression in our children and the generations left behind. (And your teachers are thinking about all of you like surrogate parents right now). And it goes without saying that some find it in a belief in the afterlife. It's a powerful human drive.

So my hope for you is that you find a reservoir of self-confidence in some aspects of your life so that you can be humble, that you learn enough to never stop learning. And rest assured that we are entering an Intellectual Renaissance interwoven across the sciences. There is no better time to be a student of technology, no better time to start a company, no better time to learn something new. Individuals with good ideas are empowered as never before.

And schools? Well, schools are stepping stones on a path of lifelong learning.

So skip forward on your future path with a playful curiosity; consider your destiny on this planet as something grand; change the world for the better, and you will find sweet success and the sublime satisfaction of symbolic immortality.

Congratulations to all of you, the class of 2010. Thank you.

Peter Thiel at Hamilton College

May 22, 2016

Thank you so much for the kind introduction. It's a tremendous honor to be here.

Like most graduation speakers my main qualification would seem to be that I am one of the few people who are even more clueless about what is going on in your lives than your parents and your professors.

Most of you are about 21 or 22 years old. You're about to begin working. I haven't worked for anybody for 21 years. But if I try to give a reason for why it makes sense for me to speak here today, I would say it's because thinking about the future is what I do for a living. And this is a commencement. It's a new beginning. As a technology investor, I invest in new beginnings. I believe in what hasn't yet been seen or been done.

This is not what I set out to do when I began my career. When I was sitting where you are, back in 1989, I would've told you that I wanted to be a lawyer. I didn't really know what lawyers do all day, but I knew they first had to go to law school, and school was familiar to me.

I had been competitively tracked from middle school to high school to college, and by going straight to law school, I knew I would be competing at the same kinds of tests I'd been taking ever since I was a kid, but I could tell everyone that I was now doing it for the sake of becoming a professional adult.

I did well enough in law school to be hired by a big New York law firm, but it turned out to be a very strange place. From the outside, everybody wanted to get in, and from the inside, everybody wanted to get out.

When I left the firm, after seven months and three days, my coworkers were surprised. One of them told me that he hadn't known it was possible to escape from Alcatraz. Now that might sound odd, because all you had to do to escape was walk through the front door and not come back. But people really did find it very hard to leave, because so much of their identity was wrapped up in having won the competitions to get there in the first place.

Just as I was leaving the law firm, I got an interview for a Supreme Court clerkship. This is sort of the top prize you can get as a lawyer. It was the absolute last stage of the competition. But I lost. At the time I was totally devastated. It seemed just like the end of the world.

About a decade later, I ran into an old friend -- someone who had helped me prepare for the Supreme Court interview, whom I hadn't seen in years. His first words to me were not, you know, 'Hi Peter' or 'How are you doing?' but rather, 'So, aren't you glad you didn't get that clerkship?' Because if I hadn't lost that last competition, we both knew that I never would have left the track laid down since middle school, I wouldn't have moved to California and co-founded a startup, I wouldn't have done anything new.

Looking back at my ambition to become a lawyer, it looks less like a plan for the future and more like an alibi for the present. It was a way to explain to anyone who would ask -- to my parents, to my peers and most of all to myself -- that there was no need to worry. I was perfectly on track. But it turned out in retrospect that my biggest problem was taking the track without thinking really hard about where it was going.

When I co-founded a technology startup, we took the opposite approach. We consciously set out to change the direction of the world: very definite, very big plans. Our goal was nothing less than to replace the U.S. dollar by creating a new digital currency.

We had a young team. When we started, I was the only person over 23 years old. When we released our first product, the first users were simply the 24 people who worked at our company. Outside, there were millions of people working in the global financial industry, and when we told some of them about our plans we noticed a clear pattern: the more experience someone had in banking, the more certain they were that our venture could never succeed.

They were wrong. People around the world now rely on PayPal to move more than \$200 billion every year. We did fail at our greater goal. The dollar's still dominant. We didn't succeed in taking over the whole world, but we did create a successful company in the process. And more importantly, we learned that while doing new things is difficult, it is far from impossible.

At this moment in your life you know fewer limits, fewer taboos and fewer fears than you will ever in the future. So do not squander your ignorance. Go out and do what your teachers and parents thought could not be done -- and what they never thought of doing.

Now this is not to say that we should assume there is no value in teaching and tradition. And here we can take inspiration from a graduate of Hamilton College, the illustrious Ezra Pound, class of 1905. Pound was a poet, and he was also a prophet of sorts, and he announced his mission in three words: 'Make it new.' When Pound said 'make it new,' he was talking about the old. He wanted to recover what was best in tradition -- and render it fresh.

Here at Hamilton, in America and that part of the world called the West, we are all part of an unusual kind of tradition. The tradition we've inherited is itself about doing new things. The new science of Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton discovered truths that had never been written down in books. Our whole continent is a new world. The founders of this country set out to create what they called 'a new order for the ages.' America is the frontier country. We are not true to our own tradition unless we seek what is new.

So how are we doing? How much is new today? It is a cliché to say that we are living through a time of rapid change, but it is an open secret that the truth is closer to stagnation. Computers are getting faster and smartphones are somewhat new. But on the other hand, jets are slower, trains are breaking down, houses are expensive and incomes are flat.

Today the word *technology* means information technology. The so-called tech industry builds computers and software. But in the 1960s, *technology* had a more expansive meaning and meant not just computers, but also airplanes, medicines, fertilizers, materials, space travel -- all sorts of things. Technology was advancing on every front and leading to a world of underwater cities, vacations on the moon and energy too cheap to meter.

We've all heard America described as a 'developed country,' setting it apart from countries that are still developing. This description pretends to be neutral. But I find it far from neutral. Because it suggests that our tradition of making new things is over. When we say we are developed, we're saying, 'that's it.' That for us, history is over. We are saying that everything there is to do has already been done, and now the only thing left is for others in the world to catch up. And in this view, the 1960s vision of a fantastic and far better future was just a mistake.

I think we should strongly refuse this temptation to assume that our history is over. Of course, if we choose to believe that we're powerless to do anything that is not familiar, we will be right, but only in a sort of self-fulfilling way. We should not, however, blame nature. It will only be our own fault.

Familiar tracks and traditions are like clichés -- they are everywhere, they may sometimes be correct, but often they are justified by nothing except constant repetition. Let me end today by questioning two clichés in particular:

The first comes from Shakespeare, who wrote this well-known piece of advice: 'To thine own self be true.' Now Shakespeare wrote that, but he didn't say it. He put it in the mouth of a character named Polonius, who Hamlet accurately describes as a tedious old fool, even though Polonius was senior counselor to the King of Denmark.

And so, in reality, Shakespeare is telling us two things. First, do not be true to yourself. How do you know you even have such a thing as a self? Your self might be motivated by competition with others, like I was. You need to discipline your self, to cultivate it and care for it. Not to follow it blindly. Second, Shakespeare's saying that you should be skeptical of advice, even from your elders. Polonius is a father speaking to his daughter, but his advice is terrible. Here Shakespeare's a faithful example of our western tradition, which does not honor what is merely inherited.

The other cliché goes like this: 'Live each day as if it were your last.' The best way to take this as advice is to do exactly the opposite. Live each day as if you will live forever. That means, first and foremost, that you should treat the people around you as if they too will be around for a very long time to come. The choices that you make today matter, because their consequences will grow greater and greater.

That is what Einstein was getting at when he supposedly said that compound interest is the most powerful force in the universe. This isn't just about finance or money, but it's about the idea that you'll get the best returns in life from investing your time in building durable friendships and long-lasting relationships.

In one sense, all of you are here today because you were approved by the admissions office of Hamilton to pursue a course of study, which is now over. In another sense, you are here because you found a group of friends to sustain you along the way, and those friendships will continue. If you take care of them, they will compound in the years ahead.

Everything that you have done so far has had some kind of formal ending, some kind of graduation. You should, and I hope that you will, take time today to celebrate all that you've achieved so far. But remember that today's commencement is not the beginning of one more thing that will end. It is the beginning of forever. And I won't delay you any further in getting on with it. Thank you.

Robert F. Smith at Morehouse College

May 19, 2019

Classmates. Class of 2019. You look beautiful. You look beautiful.

First of all, President Thomas, Board of Trustees, Faculty Staff and Morehouse Alumni, the extraordinary Angela Bassett, the distinguished Professor Dr. Edmund Gordon, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, family and friends, and most of all to my classmates, congratulations.

Earning a college degree is one of the most impressive and greatest accomplishments of life. But success as many parents and as hard as each of you have worked and have achieved today you've had a lot of help along the way. We are all the product of a community, a village, a team and many of those who've made contributions for you to arrive at this very moment today are with us.

So first and foremost, I'm going to ask you one more time you're going to stand up. You're going to turn around and you're going to celebrate all these people — our community, our family who are here to celebrate you.

All right. Come on sit down class. We got a lot — we got a long way to go. So I want to make sure you got some stretching in.

So standing here before you is one of the great honors of my life. I'm so proud to share it with you, with my mother Dr. Sylvia Smith, a lifelong educator and the greatest role model of my life who is here with me today.

This is a special week for us. We celebrate three graduations this week. My niece is graduating from my alma mater Cornell. My daughter's graduating from high school and headed off to Barnard this fall. My eldest Zoe is graduating from NYU with honors this week. She is a fifth generation in my family to graduate from college and the fourth to graduate with honors.

So first of all, I want to thank the Morehouse administration for timing this perfectly so I could attend all of those graduation ceremonies.

Morehouse was built to demand excellence and spur the advancement and development of African-American men. I've always been drawn to its rich history and I'm optimistic for its bright future. The brothers from Morehouse I've met over these years, I've revered; they understand the power of education, the responsibility that comes with it.

Willie Woods, Chairman of the Board, he and I have been friends for over 20 years, and I want to thank Chairman Woods for assembling a great class and a great organization of administrators and faculty to help you young men go forward.

In our shared history as a people and as a country, the Morehouse campus is a special place. The path you walked along Brown Street this morning to reach this commencement ceremony was paved by men of intellect and character and determination. These men understood that when Dr. King said "The arc of the moral universe bends towards justice", he wasn't saying it bends on its own accord. It bends because we choose to put our shoulders into it together and push.

The degree you earn today is one of the most elite credentials that America has to offer. But I don't want you to think about it as a document that hangs on the wall or reflects the accomplishments you've made

up to now. That degree is a contract. It's a social contract. It calls on you to devote your talents and energies to honoring those legends on whom shoulders both you and I stand.

Lord knows you're graduating into a complex world. Think about we faced in the last few years of your time here at Morehouse. We've seen the rise of Black Lives Matter lending voice to critical issues that have been ignored by too many for too long. We've seen the Me Too movement shining a spotlight on how far we still have to go to achieve real gender equality.

We've also seen the unapologetic public airing of hate doctrines by various groups. We've seen the implications of climate change become impossible to ignore and become even more severe. And our connected world has now to grapple with the new questions about secrecy, privacy, the role of intelligent machines in our work and in our lives.

And we witnessed the very foundation of our political system shaken by the blurring of the sacred line between fact and fiction, right and wrong. Yes, this is an uncertain hour for our democracy and our fragile world order but uncertainty is nothing new for our community.

Like many of yours, my family has been in these United States for eight or nine generations. We have nourished the soil with our blood. We've sown the land with our sweat. We protected this country with our bodies, contributed to the physical, cultural and intellectual fabric of this country with our minds and our talent. And yet, I'm the first generation in my family to have secured all my rights as an American citizen.

Think about it. 1865 was the first time most African-American families had a hint of access to the greatest until now wealth generating platform in America, that's land. The Freedmen's Bureau was supposed to deliver 850,000 acres of land to these formerly enslaved and then that program was cancelled and replaced by the Freedman's Savings Bank which was then looted. Essentially that recompense was reneged upon.

We didn't have broad access to the Homestead Act or the Southern Homestead Act where indeed 10% of America's land was essentially given away for less the filing fee. And it was until 1868 after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the 14th Amendment that my family actually had the birthright to be American citizens.

Then when American decided to create a social safety net — Social Security in 1935, they created the Social Security program. Yet that program had one exclusion — two categories of people: maids and farmworkers which effectively denied benefits to 66% of African Americans and 80% of Southern African Americans.

It was until 1954 that my family had a right to equal education under the protection of the law with Brown versus Board of Education. And while the Fifteenth Amendment gave my family to right to vote, the men at least, starting in 1890 those rights were rolled back in the south and remained suppressed until the passage of the Voter Rights Act of 1965.

Even today more than half a century after that, the struggle still continues to ensure true integrity at the ballot box. All these landmark extensions of our rights and subsequent retrenchments set the stage for new policy of forced desegregation, utilizing school busing that basically went in effect when I reached the first grade in my hometown of Denver, Colorado.

Our family lived in Northeast Denver, and back then, Denver, like most American cities, remained extremely divided by race, both politically and geographically. In my community, my neighbors were

mostly educated, proud, hardworking and ambitious. They were dentists, teachers, politicians, lawyers, Pullman porters, contractors, small business owners and pharmacists. They were focused on serving the African-American community and providing a safe and nurturing environment for the kids in our neighborhood.

They were on the front lines of the civil rights movement. We were sacrificing our sons to the Vietnam War. They mourned the death of a King, two Kennedys and an X. And despite all they gave they had yet to achieve the fullness of the American dream. But they continued to believe that it was only a matter of time and if not for them, then surely for their children.

So I was among a small number of kids from my neighborhood who were bused across town to a high-performing, predominantly white school in Southeast Denver. Every morning we loaded up on Bus Number 13 — I'll never forget it — that was taken over to Carson Elementary School.

That policy of busing only lasted to my fifth-grade year when intense protests and political pressure brought the end to forced busing. But those five years dramatically changed my life.

The teachers of Carson were extraordinary. They embraced me, challenged me to think critically and start moving towards my full potential. In turn, I came to realize at a young age that the white kids, the black kids, the Jewish kid and that one Asian kid were pretty much all the same. It wasn't just a school itself; it was a community that I lived in that embraced and supported all that we were doing.

Since most of the parents of my neighborhood were working, a whole bunch of us walked over to Mrs. Brown's house every day after school and stayed there until our parents got home from work. Mrs. Brown was incredible. She kept us safe, made sure we did our homework the right way, gave us nutritious snacks and taught us about responsibility.

Because her house was filled with children of all ages, I had suddenly older kids all around me who acted as role models, who were studying hard and believed in themselves. Mrs. Brown also happened to be married to the first black lieutenant governor of our state. So we saw the possibilities first-hand.

Amazingly almost every single student on Bus Number 13 went on to become a profession. I'm still in touch with many of them as they make up the bedrock of our community today. They're elected officials, doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, professors, community organizers and business leaders — an incredible concentration of black men and black women from the same working-class neighborhood.

Yet when I looked at the extended community that I lived in and those kids who didn't get a spot on Bus Number 13, their success rate was far lower, and the connection is inescapable. Everything about my life changed because of those few short years but the window closed for others just as fast as it opened for me. And that's the story of the black experience in America.

Getting a fleeting glimpse of opportunity and success just before the window is slammed shut. The cycle of resistance to oppression followed by legislation, followed by the weakening of that legislation, followed by more oppression and more resistance has affected and afflicted every single generation. And even as we've seen some of the major barriers come crashing down in recent years, we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we didn't acknowledge just how many of these injustices still persist.

Where you live shouldn't determine where you get it whether or not you get educated. Where you go to school shouldn't determine whether you get textbooks. The opportunity to access — the opportunity for access should be determined only by the fierceness of your intellect and the courage and your creativity, and should be fueled by the grit that allows you to overcome expectations that weren't set high enough.

We've seen remarkable breakthroughs in medical research, yet race-based disparities in health outcomes still exist. You're 41% more likely to die of breast cancer if you're an African-American woman in America than if you were white. You're 2.3 times more likely to die of prostate cancer for an African-American man than if you were white.

If you are African American, you're more likely to be stopped by the police, more likely to be issued a ticket when you're stopped, more likely to be threatened with force than when you were white. That's our reality. This is the world you're inheriting.

Now I'm telling you things as I don't want you to think that I'm bitter, nor do I want you to be bitter. I call upon you to make things better. Because the great lesson of my life is that despite the challenges we face, America is truly an extraordinary country and our world is getting smaller by the day and you are equipped with every tool to make it your own.

Today for the first time in human history, success requires no prerequisite of wealth or capital, no ownership of land or natural resources or people. Today success can be created solely through the power of one's mind, ideas encouraged. Intellectual capital can be cultivated, monetized and instantaneously distributed across the globe.

Intellectual capital has become the new currency of business and finance, and the promise of brain power to move people from poverty to prosperity in one generation has never been more possible. Technology, the world that I live in, is creating a whole new set of on-ramps to the 21st century economy and together we will help assure that the African-American community will acquire the tech skills and be the beneficiaries in a sector that is being automated.

Black men understand that securing the bag just is the beginning, that success is only real if our community is protected, our potential is realized, and if our most valuable assets, our people, find strength in owning the businesses that provide economic stability in our community.

This is your moment, graduates. Between doubt and destiny is action. Between our community and the American dream is leadership. That's your leadership, that's your destiny.

This doesn't mean ignoring injustice; it means using your strength to write order. And when you are confronted with racism, listen to the words of Guy Johnson, the son of Maya Angelou who once wrote: "Racism was like gravity. You got to just keep pushing again against it without spending too much time thinking about it."

SO HOW DO YOU SEIZE YOUR AMERICAN DREAM?

Let me get specific and give you a few rules to live by because I understand that once you cross a stage, we may not be able to tell you much.

RULE 1: NOTHING REPLACES ACTUALLY DOING THE WORK

Rule number one: You need to know that nothing replaces actually doing the work.

Whenever young person tells me they aspire to be an entrepreneur, the first question I ask him is why. For many they think it's a great way to get rich quick. I'm going to write an app, I'm going to build a company, make a few million dollars before I'm 25. Look that can happen but frankly that's awfully rare.

The usual scenario is that successful entrepreneurs spend endless hours, days, years, toiling away for little time, little pay and zero glamor. And in all honesty, that's where the joy of success actually resides.

Before I ever got into private equity, I was a chemical engineer. And I spent pretty much every waking hour in windowless labs during the work that helped me become an expert in my field. It was only after I put in the time to develop this expertise and the discipline of the scientific process that I was able to apply my knowledge beyond the lab.

Greatness is born out of the grind, so embrace the grind. A thoughtful and intentional approach to the grind will help you become an expert in your craft.

When I meet a black man or woman who's at the top of their field, I see the highest form of execution. That's no accident. There's a good chance it took that black leader a whole lot more grinding to get them where they are today. I look at the current and former black CEOs who inspired my life. I have to tell you they blow me away every time I meet with them. People like Bernard Tyson, Ken Frazier, Ken Chenault, Dick Parsons, Ursula Burns and the late Barry Rand.

They may not have attended Morehouse but they had the Morehouse spirit. They knew that being the best meant grinding every single day. It means putting in the 10,000 hours necessary to become a master of your craft and I'll tell you one of the great leaders of our time Muhammad Ali once said:

"I hated every minute of training but I thought to myself suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion."

So grind it out and live your life as a champion.

RULE 2: TAKE THOUGHTFUL RISKS

My next rule is to take thoughtful risks. My granddad took a particular interest in my career. He couldn't have been prouder when I had a stable job at Kraft General Foods as an engineer, because for him they had that kind of job security of my age was a dream come true.

When I was — when I told him I was thinking about leaving to go to grad school, he frankly was worried. Then you can imagine how worried he became so many years later when I told him I was leaving Goldman Sachs. I said "I'm going to start my own private equity firm, granddad, to focus on enterprise software."

He thought I'd gone crazy. But I respected my granddad and his wisdom and his thoughtfulness and frankly his protectiveness over me. But I'd done my homework, I calculated the risks and I importantly knew that I was going to invest in one of the most important things and gather the fundamental design point of the American dream and that was to be a business owner.

So I decided with confidence I was going to make a one big bet on the asset that I knew best: myself. There are always reasons to be risk averse. As you know graduating from Morehouse can make you risk-averse. The path that you're on, if you just take a conservative path, your outcomes and choices would probably be pretty good. But that doesn't mean that you should gamble with your career or courtering from job to job frankly because it looks — the grass always looks a little greener; it does mean that you should evaluate your options.

You should be taking business and career risks, do the analysis and most importantly trust your instincts. When you bet on yourself, that's likely a good bet.

RULE 3: BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT THE WORDS YOU CHOOSE

My third rule is always be intentional about the words you choose.

I know Morehouse has taught you all that what you say matters and what you say carries with it enormous power. Be intentional about the words you speak, how you define yourself, what you call each other, the people you spend time with and the love you create. This all matters immensely, it will define you.

RULE 4: YOU ARE ENOUGH

My fourth rule, which is actually my favorite, is to always know that you are enough. I mentioned that before going to investment banking at Goldman Sachs, I was working as an engineer at Kraft General Foods. One day I was at a meeting with the number of my department heads going through our divisional strategy and sitting around a conference table lining up what were the most important strategic imperatives.

When I looked at those six initiatives, I was leading five of them. I was half the age of everybody in that room and I know making a third of everybody in that room. And I said to myself I'm either doing something really right or really wrong. And frankly it was a little bit of both.

So that became a lesson to me in realizing my worth and self-worth. It isn't just about salary, although that does matter. It's about demanding respect from others and from yourself. A realization and respect for all the skills and talents you bring to the table. When you have confidence in your own worth, you'll become the one to raise your hand for that next assignment and it may be hard. That made me putting in time on nights and weekends and it also means you'll be gaining incremental skills and experiences that enhance your craftsmanship and earn your respect through your body of work.

Let the quality of your work products speak of your capabilities. Know that you are only bound by the limits of your own conviction because you are Morehouse man. There is no room on this earth you can't enter without your head held high. You will encounter people in your life, as I have, who will want to make you feel like you don't belong. But when you respect your own body of work, that's all the respect you need.

In the words of the great Quincy Jones and Ray Charles:

"Not one drop of my self-worth depends on your acceptance of me."

You are enough.

RULE 5: WE ALL HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO LIBERATE OTHERS

The fifth and final lesson for you all today is as follows. We all have the responsibility to liberate others so that they can become their best selves in human rights, the arts and business and in life. The fact is as the next generation of African-American leaders, you don't want to just be on the bus. You want to own it, you want to drive it and you want to pick up as many people along the way as you can.

Because I will tell you more than the money, the awards, the recognition, and the titles, we will all be measured by how much we contribute to the success of the people around us. How many people will you get on your Bus Number 13?

We need you to become the elected leaders who step up and fix the laws that engender discrimination and set a tone of respect in our public discourse. We need you to become the C-suite executives who change corporate culture, build sustainable business models and make diversity and inclusion a core and unshakeable value.

We need you to become the entrepreneurs who will innovate inclusively, expand wages for all Americans and lower the unemployment rate in our communities. We need you to be the educators who set the standards and demand the resources to deliver on those standards and inspire the next generation and we need you to invest the real estate and businesses in our communities and create value for all of us in those communities.

No matter what profession you choose, each of you must become a community builder. No matter how far you travel you can't ever forget where you came from. You're responsible for building strong safe places where our young brothers and sisters can raise children and grow in confidence. Watch and learn from positive role models and they believe that they too are entitled to the American Dream.

You men of Morehouse are already doing this. I know your own student government, in fact, send students on a bus to underserved communities to actually empower young black men and women to seize their own narrative and find their own power in their own voice. This is exactly the kind of leadership I'm talking about.

Remember that building a community doesn't always have to be about sweeping change either but it does have to be intentional. You just can't be a role model sometimes.

I'm cognizant of the fact that every time I'm in public, people are observing my actions. The same goes for you. Building community can't be insular. The world has never been smaller but we need to make and help our communities think bigger.

I've invested particularly in internship programs because I've observed the power of exposing young minds to opportunities that work in their neighborhoods so they can see what they can become.

Help those around you see the beauty of this vast world. Help them believe that they too can capture that dream. And remember community can be anywhere. Back in the 1960s and '70s, community was a few blocks around where I grew up. Today we — you can create communities of people all around the world.

Merging the physical and digital communities will be one of the great opportunities that you have and you will have in these years going forward. And finally, don't forget that communities thrive in the smallest of gestures. Be the first to congratulate a friend on their new job. Buy their new product posted on social media and tell everybody how great it is and be the first to console them when they face adversity.

Treat all people with dignity even if you can't see how they're going to help you. And most important of all whatever it takes, never ever forget to call your mother. And I do mean call, don't text. Texts don't count.

So speaking of mothers, let me allow me a point of personal privilege to end with a story that speaks volumes about mine.

Summer 1963, when I was just 9 months old, my mother picked me and my brother up and hauled 1700 miles away from Denver to Washington DC so we could be there for a Morehouse Man speech. My mother knew that her boys were too young to remember that speech but she believed that the history that we witnessed that day would forever resonate and become part of the men that we would one day become.

My mom was right as usual. I still feel that day in my bones and it echoes around us here at Morehouse. Decades after that cross-country trip I had the privilege to take my granddad to the opposite side of the National Mall to celebrate the inauguration of the first African-American President.

As we sat in that audience in that cold morning, he pointed to a window just behind the flag in the Capitol Building, he said, “You know grandson, when I was a teenager I used to work in that room right there. It’s the Senate Lounge, I used to serve coffee and tea and take hats and coats for the Senators.” He said “I recall looking out that window during Franklin Roosevelt’s inauguration.” He said “Son, I did not see one black face in the crowd that day.” He said “So here we are, you and I watching this.” He said “Grandson, you can see how America can change when people have the will to make a change.”

The beautiful symmetry of our return to the nation’s capital under such different circumstances were not lost on us. The poetry of time and soul that Lincoln called *the mystic chords of memory* resonated in both of our hearts. You cannot be a witness to history as I have or walk the halls of Morehouse as you have without profound respect for the unsung everyday heroes who generation after generation little by little nudged, shoved and ultimately bent that arc of the moral universe a little closer to justice.

This is a history and the heritage you inherit. This is a responsibility that now lies upon your broad shoulders. True wealth comes from contributing to the liberation of people and the liberation of communities we come from depends upon the grit and the determination and the greatness inside of you, using your skills and your knowledge and your instincts to serve to change the world in only the way that you can.

You great Morehouse men are bound again only by your limits of your own convictions and creativity. You have the power within to be great, be you, be unstoppable, be undeniable and accomplish the things that people thought you never would. I’m counting on you to load up your bus and share that journey.

Now let’s not forget what Dr. King said in his final moments in his famous sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church: “I want to be on your right side and on your left side, in love and in justice, in truth and in commitment so that we can make this old world a new world.”

So graduates, look to your right, look to your left. Actually take a moment; stand up. Give each other a hug. I’m going to wait.

Men of Morehouse, you are surrounded by a community of people who have helped you arrive at the sacred place and on this sacred day. On behalf of the eight generations of my family who have been in this country, we’re going to put a little fuel in your bus.

Now I’ve got the Alumni over there, and this is the challenge to you Alumni. This is my class, 2019.

And my family is making a grant to eliminate their student loans.

Now I know my class will make sure they pay this forward, and I want my class to look at these alumnus, these beautiful Morehouse brothers and let’s make sure every class has the same opportunity going forward.

Because we are enough to take care of our own community. We are enough to ensure we have all the opportunities of the American Dream and we will show it to each other through our actions and through our words and through our deeds.

So Class of 2019, may the Sun always shine upon you. May the wind always be at your back. And may God always hold you in the cradle of her hand.

The Entertainers

Conan O'Brien – 2011 – Dartmouth College

Aaron Sorkin – 2012 – Syracuse University

Joss Whedon – 2013 – Wesleyan University

Shonda Rhimes – 2014 – Dartmouth

Steven Spielberg – 2016 – Harvard University

If you know of any commencement speeches you think I'd like or have any thoughts on categories I've missed, please email at kevin@12mv2.com with the subject "Commencement Speeches you may like." Thank you!

[More Compilations](#)

Conan O'Brien at Dartmouth College

June 12, 2011

I've been living in Los Angeles for two years, and I've never been this cold in my life.

I will pay anyone here \$300 for GORE-TEX gloves. Anybody? I'm serious. I have the cash.

Before I begin, I must point out that behind me sits a highly admired President of the United States and decorated war hero while I, a cable television talk show host, has been chosen to stand here and impart wisdom.

I pray I never witness a more damning example of what is wrong with America today.

Graduates, faculty, parents, relatives, undergraduates, and old people that just come to these things: Good morning and congratulations to the Dartmouth Class of 2011.

Today, you have achieved something special, something only 92% of Americans your age will ever know: a college diploma. That's right, with your college diploma you now have a crushing advantage over 8% of the workforce.

I'm talking about dropout losers like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg. Incidentally, speaking of Mr. Zuckerberg, only at Harvard would someone have to invent a massive social network just to talk with someone in the next room.

LIFE IS NOT FAIR

My first job as your commencement speaker is to illustrate that life is not fair. For example, you have worked tirelessly for four years to earn the diploma you'll be receiving this weekend.

That was great.

And Dartmouth is giving me the same degree for interviewing the fourth lead in Twilight. Deal with it.

Another example that life is not fair: if it does rain, the powerful rich people on stage get the tent. Deal with it.

I would like to thank President Kim for inviting me here today. After my phone call with President Kim, I decided to find out a little bit about the man.

He goes by President Kim and Dr. Kim. To his friends, he's Jim Kim, J to the K, Special K, JK Rowling, the Just Kidding Kimster, and most puzzling, "Stinky Pete."

He served as the chair of the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School, spearheaded a task force for the World Health Organization on Global Health Initiatives, won a MacArthur Genius Grant, and was one of TIME Magazine's 100 Most Influential People in 2006.

Good God, man, what the hell are you compensating for?

Seriously. We get it. You're smart.

By the way Dr. Kim, you were brought to Dartmouth to lead, and as a world-class anthropologist, you were also hired to figure out why each of these graduating students ran around a bonfire 111 times.

But I thank you for inviting me here, Stinky Pete, and it is an honor. Though some of you may see me as a celebrity, you should know that I once sat where you sit.

Literally. Late last night I snuck out here and sat in every seat. I did it to prove a point: I am not bright and I have a lot of free time.

But this is a wonderful occasion and it is great to be here in New Hampshire, where I am getting an honorary degree and all the legal fireworks I can fit in the trunk of my car.

You know, New Hampshire is such a special place. When I arrived, I took a deep breath of this crisp New England air and thought, “Wow, I’m in the state that’s next to the state where Ben and Jerry’s ice cream is made.”

But don’t get me wrong, I take my task today very seriously.

When I got the call two months ago to be your speaker, I decided to prepare with the same intensity many of you have devoted to an important term paper. So late last night, I began.

I drank two cans of Red Bull, snorted some Adderall, played a few hours of Call of Duty, and then opened my browser.

I think Wikipedia put it best when they said “Dartmouth College is a private Ivy League University in Hanover, New Hampshire, United States.”

Thank you and good luck.

To communicate with you students today, I have gone to great lengths to become well-versed in your unique linguistic patterns. In fact, just this morning I left Baker Berry with my tripee Barry to eat a Billy Bob at the Bema when my flitz to Francesca was Blitz jacked by some d-bag on his FSP.

Yes, I’ve done my research. This college was named after the Second Earl of Dartmouth, a good friend of the Third Earl of UC Santa Cruz and the Duke of the Barbizon School of Beauty.

Your school motto is “Vox clamantis in deserto,” which means “Voice crying out in the wilderness.”

This is easily the most pathetic school motto I have ever heard.

Apparently, it narrowly beat out “Silently Weeping in Thick Shrub” and “Whimpering in Moist Leaves without Pants.”

Your school color is green, and this color was chosen by Frederick Mather in 1867 because, and this is true— I looked it up — it was the only color that had not been taken already.” I cannot remember hearing anything so sad.

Dartmouth, you have an inferiority complex, and you should not. You have graduated more great fictitious Americans than any other college. Meredith Grey of Grey’s Anatomy. Pete Campbell from Mad Men. Michael Corleone from The Godfather.

In fact, I look forward to next years’ Valedictory Address by your esteemed classmate, Count Chocula. Of course, your greatest fictitious graduate is Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner. Man, can you imagine if a real Treasury Secretary made those kinds of decisions? Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.

Now I know what you’re going to say, Dartmouth, you’re going to say, well “We’ve got Dr. Seuss.” Well guess what, we’re all tired of hearing about Dr. Seuss.

Face it: The man rhymed fafloozle with saznoozle. In the literary community, that's called cheating.

Your insecurity is so great, Dartmouth, that you don't even think you deserve a real podium. I'm sorry. What the hell is this thing? It looks like you stole it from the set of Survivor: Nova Scotia.

Seriously, it looks like something a bear would use at an AA meeting.

No, Dartmouth, you must stand tall. Raise your heads high and feel proud. Because if Harvard, Yale, and Princeton are your self-involved, vain, name-dropping older brothers, you are the cool, sexually confident, lacrosse playing younger sibling who knows how to throw a party and looks good in a down vest.

Brown, of course, is your lesbian sister who never leaves her room. And Penn, Columbia, and Cornell — well, frankly, who gives a shit.

Yes, I've always had a special bond with this school. In fact, this is my second time coming here.

When I was 17 years old and touring colleges, way back in the fall of 1980, I came to Dartmouth. Dartmouth was a very different place back then. I made the trip up from Boston on a mule and, after asking the blacksmith in West Leb for directions, I came to this beautiful campus.

No dormitories had been built yet, so I stayed with a family of fur traders in White River Junction. It snowed heavily during my visit and I was trapped here for four months.

I was forced to eat the mule, who a week earlier had been forced to eat the fur traders. Still, I loved Dartmouth and I vowed to return.

But fate dealt a heavy blow. With no money, I was forced to enroll in a small, local commuter school, a pulsating sore on a muddy elbow of the Charles River. I was a miserable wretch, and to this day I cannot help but wonder: What if I had gone to Dartmouth?

If I had gone to Dartmouth, I might have spent at least some of my college years outside and today I might not be allergic to all plant life, as well as most types of rock.

If I had gone to Dartmouth, right now I'd be wearing a fleece thong instead of a lace thong.

If I had gone to Dartmouth, I still wouldn't know the second verse to "Dear Old Dartmouth." Face it, none of you do. You all mumble that part.

If I had gone to Dartmouth, I'd have a liver the size and consistency of a bean bag chair.

Finally, if I had gone to Dartmouth, today I'd be getting an honorary degree at Harvard. Imagine how awesome that would be.

You are a great school, and you deserve a historic commencement address. That's right, I want my message today to be forever remembered because it changed the world.

To do this, I must suggest groundbreaking policy. Winston Churchill gave his famous "Iron Curtain" speech at Westminster College in 1946. JFK outlined his nuclear disarmament policy at American University in 1963.

Today, I would like to set forth my own policy here at Dartmouth: I call it "The Conan Doctrine."

Under “The Conan Doctrine”: All bachelor degrees will be upgraded to master’s degrees. All master’s degrees will be upgraded to PhDs. And all MBA students will be immediately transferred to a white collar prison.

Under “The Conan Doctrine,” Winter Carnival will become Winter Carnivale and be moved to Rio. Clothing will be optional, all expenses paid by the Alumni Association.

Your nickname, the Big Green, will be changed to something more kick-ass like “The Jade Blade,” the “Seafoam Avenger,” or simply “Lime-Zilla.”

The D-Plan and “quarter system” will finally be updated to “the one sixty-fourth system.” Semesters will last three days. Students will be encouraged to take 48 semesters off. They must, however, be on campus during their Sophomore 4th of July.

Under “The Conan Doctrine,” I will re-instate Tubestock. And I will punish those who tried to replace it with Fieldstock. Rafting and beer are a much better combination than a field and a beer.

I happen to know that in two years, they were going to downgrade Fieldstock to Deskstock, seven hours of fun sitting quietly at your desk. Don’t let those bastards do it.

And finally, under “The Conan Doctrine,” all commencement speakers who shamelessly pander with cheap, inside references designed to get childish applause, will be forced to apologize – to the greatest graduating class in the history of the world. Dartmouth class of 2011 rules!

Besides policy, another hallmark of great commencement speeches is deep, profound advice like “reach for the stars.”

Well today, I am not going to waste your time with empty clichés. Instead, I am going to give you real, practical advice that you will need to know if you are going to survive the next few years.

First, adult acne lasts longer than you think. I almost cancelled two days ago because I had a zit on my eye. Guys, this is important: You cannot iron a shirt while wearing it.

Here’s another one. If you live on Ramen Noodles for too long, you lose all feelings in your hands and your stool becomes a white gel.

And finally, wearing colorful Converse high-tops beneath your graduation robe is a great way to tell your classmates that this is just the first of many horrible decisions you plan to make with the rest of your life.

Of course, there are many parents here and I have real advice for them as well. Parents, you should write this down: Many of your children you haven’t seen them in four years. Well, now you are about to see them every day when they come out of the basement to tell you the wi-fi isn’t working.

If your child majored in fine arts or philosophy, you have good reason to be worried. The only place where they are now really qualified to get a job is ancient Greece. Good luck with that degree.

The traffic today on East Wheelock is going to be murder, so once they start handing out diplomas, you should slip out in the middle of the K’s. And, I have to tell you this: You will spend more money framing your child’s diploma than they will earn in the next six months. It’s tough out there, so be patient.

The only people hiring right now are Panera Bread and Mexican drug cartels.

Yes, you parents must be patient because it is indeed a grim job market out there. And one of the reasons it’s so tough finding work is that aging baby boomers refuse to leave their jobs. Trust me on this.

Even when they promise you for five years that they are going to leave and say it on television, I mean you can go on YouTube right now and watch the guy do it, there is no guarantee they won't come back.

Of course I'm speaking generally. But enough. This is not a time for grim prognostications or negativity.

No, I came here today because, believe it or not, I actually do have something real to tell you.

Eleven years ago I gave an address to a graduating class at Harvard. I have not spoken at a graduation since because I thought I had nothing left to say.

But then 2010 came. And now I'm here, three thousand miles from my home, because I learned a hard but profound lesson last year and I'd like to share it with you.

In 2000, I told graduates "Don't be afraid to fail."

Well now I'm here to tell you that, though you should not fear failure, you should do your very best to avoid it.

Nietzsche famously said "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." But what he failed to stress is that it almost kills you. Disappointment stings and, for driven, successful people like yourselves it is disorienting.

What Nietzsche should have said is "Whatever doesn't kill you, makes you watch a lot of Cartoon Network and drink mid-price Chardonnay at 11 in the morning."

Now, by definition, Commencement speakers at an Ivy League college are considered successful. But a little over a year ago, I experienced a profound and very public disappointment. I did not get what I wanted, and I left a system that had nurtured and helped define me for the better part of 17 years.

I went from being in the center of the grid to not only off the grid, but underneath the coffee table that the grid sits on, lost in the shag carpeting that is underneath the coffee table supporting the grid. It was the making of a career disaster, and a terrible analogy.

But then something spectacular happened. Fogbound, with no compass, and adrift, I started trying things. I grew a strange, cinnamon beard. I dove into the world of social media. I started tweeting my comedy. I threw together a national tour. I played the guitar. I did stand-up, wore a skin-tight blue leather suit, recorded an album, made a documentary, and frightened my friends and family.

Ultimately, I abandoned all preconceived perceptions of my career path and stature and took a job on basic cable with a network most famous for showing reruns, along with sitcoms created by a tall, black man who dresses like an old, black woman.

I did a lot of silly, unconventional, spontaneous and seemingly irrational things and guess what: with the exception of the blue leather suit, it was the most satisfying and fascinating year of my professional life.

To this day I still don't understand exactly what happened, but I have never had more fun, been more challenged — and this is important — had more conviction about what I was doing.

How could this be true? Well, it's simple: There are few things more liberating in this life than having your worst fear realized.

I went to college with many people who prided themselves on knowing exactly who they were and exactly where they were going.

At Harvard, five different guys in my class told me that they would one day be President of the United States. Four of them were later killed in motel shoot-outs. The other one briefly hosted Blues Clues, before dying senselessly in yet another motel shoot-out.

Your path at 22 will not necessarily be your path at 32 or 42. One's dream is constantly evolving, rising and falling, changing course. This happens in every job, but because I have worked in comedy for twenty-five years, I can probably speak best about my own profession.

Way back in the 1940s there was a very, very funny man named Jack Benny. He was a giant star, easily one of the greatest comedians of his generation. And a much younger man named Johnny Carson wanted very much to be Jack Benny.

In some ways he was, but in many ways he wasn't. He emulated Jack Benny, but his own quirks and mannerisms, along with a changing medium, pulled him in a different direction. And yet his failure to completely become his hero made him the funniest person of his generation.

David Letterman wanted to be Johnny Carson, and was not, and as a result my generation of comedians wanted to be David Letterman. And none of us are. My peers and I have all missed that mark in a thousand different ways.

But the point is this: It is our failure to become our perceived ideal that ultimately defines us and makes us unique. It's not easy, but if you accept your misfortune and handle it right, your perceived failure can become a catalyst for profound re-invention.

So, at the age of 47, after 25 years of obsessively pursuing my dream, that dream changed. For decades, in show business, the ultimate goal of every comedian was to host The Tonight Show. It was the Holy Grail, and like many people I thought that achieving that goal would define me as successful. But that is not true.

No specific job or career goal defines me, and it should not define you. In 2000 — in 2000, I told graduates to not be afraid to fail, and I still believe that.

But today I tell you that whether you fear it or not, disappointment will come. The beauty is that through disappointment you can gain clarity, and with clarity comes conviction and true originality.

Many of you here today are getting your diploma at this Ivy League school because you have committed yourself to a dream and worked hard to achieve it. And there is no greater cliché in a commencement address than “follow your dream.”

Well I am here to tell you that whatever you think your dream is now, it will probably change. And that's okay.

Four years ago, many of you had a specific vision of what your college experience was going to be and who you were going to become. And I bet, today, most of you would admit that your time here was very different from what you imagined.

Your roommates changed, your major changed, for some of you your sexual orientation changed. I bet some of you have changed your sexual orientation since I began this speech. I know I have.

But through the good and especially the bad, the person you are now is someone you could never have conjured in the fall of 2007.

I have told you many things today, most of it foolish but some of it true.

I'd like to end my address by breaking a taboo and quoting myself from 17 months ago.

At the end of my final program with NBC, just before signing off, I said "Work hard, be kind, and amazing things will happen."

Today, receiving this honor and speaking to the Dartmouth Class of 2011 from behind a tree-trunk, I have never believed that more.

Thank you very much, and congratulations.

Aaron Sorkin at Syracuse University

May 13, 2012

Thank you very much. Madam Chancellor, members of the Board of Trustees, members of the faculty and administration, parents and friends, honored guests and graduates, thank you for inviting me to speak today at this magnificent Commencement ceremony.

There's a story about a man and a woman who have been married for 40 years. One evening at dinner the woman turns to her husband and says, "You know, 40 years ago on our wedding day you told me that you loved me and you haven't said those words since." They sit in silence for a long moment before the husband says "If I change my mind, I'll let you know."

Well, it's been a long time since I sat where you sit, and I can remember looking up at my teachers with great admiration, with fondness, with gratitude and with love. Some of the teachers who were there that day are here this day and I wanted to let them know that I haven't changed my mind.

There's another story. Two newborn babies are lying side by side in the hospital and they glance at each other. Ninety years later, through a remarkable coincidence, the two are back in the same hospital lying side by side in the same hospital room. They look at each other and one of them says, "So what'd you think?"

It's going to be a very long time before you have to answer that question, but time shifts gears right now and starts to gain speed. Just ask your parents whose heads, I promise you, are exploding right now. They think they took you home from the maternity ward last month. They think you learned how to walk last week. They don't understand how you could possibly be getting a degree in something today. They listened to "Cats in the Cradle" the whole car ride here.

I'd like to say to the parents that I realized something while I was writing this speech: the last teacher your kids will have in college will be me. And that thought scared the hell out of me. Frankly, you should feel exactly the same way. But I am the father of an 11-year-old daughter, so I do know how proud you are today, how proud your daughters and your sons make you every day, and that they did just learn how to walk last week, that you'll never not be there for them, that you love them more than they'll ever know and that it doesn't matter how many degrees get put in their hand, they will always be dumber than you are.

And make no mistake about it, you are dumb. You're a group of incredibly well-educated dumb people. I was there. We all were there. You're barely functional. There are some screw-ups headed your way. I wish I could tell you that there was a trick to avoiding the screw-ups, but the screw-ups, they're a-coming for ya. It's a combination of life being unpredictable, and you being super dumb.

Today is May 13th and today you graduate. Growing up, I looked at my future as a timeline of graduations in which every few years, I'd be given more freedom and reward as I passed each milestone of childhood. When I get my driver's license, my life will be like this; when I'm a senior, my life will be like that; when I go off to college, my life will be like this; when I move out of the dorms, my life will be like that; and then finally, graduation. And on graduation day, I had only one goal left, and that was to be part of professional theater. We have this in common, you and I—we want to be able to earn a living doing what we love. Whether you're a writer, mathematician, engineer, architect, butcher, baker or candlestick maker, you want an invitation to the show.

Today is May 13th, and today you graduate, and today you already know what I know: to get where you're going, you have to be good, and to be good where you're going, you have to be damned good. Every once in a while, you'll succeed. Most of the time you'll fail, and most of the time the circumstances will be well beyond your control.

When we were casting my first movie, "A Few Good Men," we saw an actor just 10 months removed from the theater training program at UCLA. We liked him very much and we cast him in a small, but featured role as an endearingly dimwitted Marine corporal. The actor had been working as a Domino's Pizza delivery boy for 10 months, so the news that he'd just landed his first professional job and that it was in a new movie that Rob Reiner was directing, starring Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson, was met with happiness. But as is often the case in show business, success begets success before you've even done anything, and a week later the actor's agent called. The actor had been offered the lead role in a new, as-yet-untitled Milos Forman film. He was beside himself. He felt loyalty to the first offer, but Forman after all was offering him the lead. We said we understood, no problem, good luck, we'll go with our second choice. Which, we did. And two weeks later, the Milos Forman film was scrapped. Our second choice, who was also making his professional debut, was an actor named Noah Wyle. Noah would go on to become one of the stars of the television series "ER" and hasn't stopped working since. I don't know what the first actor is doing, and I can't remember his name. Sometimes, just when you think you have the ball safely in the end zone, you're back to delivering pizzas for Domino's. Welcome to the NFL.

In the summer of 1983, after I graduated, I moved to New York to begin my life as a struggling writer. I got a series of survival jobs that included bartending, ticket-taking, telemarketing, limo driving, and dressing up as a moose to pass out leaflets in a mall. I ran into a woman who'd been a senior here when I was a freshman. I asked her how it was going and how she felt Syracuse had prepared her for the early stages of her career. She said, "Well, the thing is, after three years you start to forget everything they taught you in college. But once you've done that, you'll be fine." I laughed because I thought it was funny and also because I wanted to ask her out, but I also think she was wrong.

As a freshman drama student—and this story is now becoming famous—I had a play analysis class—it was part of my requirement. The professor was Gerardine Clark. (applause) If anybody was wondering, the drama students are sitting over there (applause). The play analysis class met for 90 minutes twice a week. We read two plays a week and we took a 20-question true or false quiz at the beginning of the session that tested little more than whether or not we'd read the play. The problem was that the class was at 8:30 in the morning, it met all the way down on East Genesee, I lived all the way up at Brewster/Boland, and I don't know if you've noticed, but from time to time the city of Syracuse experiences inclement weather. All this going to class and reading and walking through snow, wind chill that's apparently powered by jet engines, was having a negative effect on my social life in general and my sleeping in particular. At one point, being quizzed on "Death of a Salesman," a play I had not read, I gave an answer that indicated that I wasn't aware that at the end of the play the salesman dies. And I failed the class. I had to repeat it my sophomore year; it was depressing, frustrating and deeply embarrassing. And it was without a doubt the single most significant event that occurred in my evolution as a writer. I showed up my sophomore year and I went to class, and I paid attention, and we read plays and I paid attention, and we discussed structure and tempo and intention and obstacle, possible improbabilities, improbable impossibilities, and I paid attention, and by God when I got my grades at the end of the year, I'd turned that F into a D. I'm joking: it was pass/fail.

But I stood at the back of the Eisenhower Theater at the Kennedy Center in Washington watching a pre-Broadway tryout of my plays, knowing that when the curtain came down, I could go back to my hotel room and fix the problem in the second act with the tools that Gerry Clark gave me. Eight years ago, I

was introduced to Arthur Miller at a Dramatists Guild function and we spent a good part of the evening talking. A few weeks later when he came down with the flu he called and asked if I could fill in for him as a guest lecturer at NYU. The subject was “Death of a Salesman.” You made a good decision coming to school here.

I’ve made some bad decisions. I lost a decade of my life to cocaine addiction. You know how I got addicted to cocaine? I tried it. The problem with drugs is that they work, right up until the moment that they decimate your life. Try cocaine, and you’ll become addicted to it. Become addicted to cocaine, and you will either be dead, or you will wish you were dead, but it will only be one or the other. My big fear was that I wasn’t going to be able to write without it. There was no way I was going to be able to write without it. Last year I celebrated my 11-year anniversary of not using coke. (applause) Thank you. In that 11 years, I’ve written three television series, three movies, a Broadway play, won the Academy Award and taught my daughter all the lyrics to “Pirates of Penzance.” I have good friends.

You’ll meet a lot of people who, to put it simply, don’t know what they’re talking about. In 1970 a CBS executive famously said that there were four things that we would never, ever see on television: a divorced person, a Jewish person, a person living in New York City and a man with a moustache. By 1980, every show on television was about a divorced Jew who lives in New York City and goes on a blind date with Tom Selleck.

Develop your own compass, and trust it. Take risks, dare to fail, remember the first person through the wall always gets hurt. My junior and senior years at Syracuse, I shared a five-bedroom apartment at the top of East Adams with four roommates, one of whom was a fellow theater major named Chris. Chris was a sweet guy with a sly sense of humor and a sunny stage presence. He was born out of his time, and would have felt most at home playing Mickey Rooney’s sidekick in “Babes on Broadway.” I had subscriptions back then to Time and Newsweek. Chris used to enjoy making fun of what he felt was an odd interest in world events that had nothing to do with the arts. I lost touch with Chris after we graduated and so I’m not quite certain when he died. But I remember about a year and a half after the last time I saw him, I read an article in Newsweek about a virus that was burning its way across the country. The Centers for Disease Control was calling it “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome” or AIDS for short. And they were asking the White House for \$35 million for research, care and cure. The White House felt that \$35 million was way too much money to spend on a disease that was only affecting homosexuals, and they passed. Which I’m sure they wouldn’t have done if they’d known that \$35 million was a steal compared to the \$2 billion it would cost only 10 years later.

Am I saying that Chris would be alive today if only he’d read Newsweek? Of course not. But it seems to me that more and more we’ve come to expect less and less of each other, and that’s got to change. Your friends, your family, this school expect more of you than vocational success.

Today is May 13th and today you graduate and the rules are about to change, and one of them is this: Decisions are made by those who show up. Don’t ever forget that you’re a citizen of this world.

Don’t ever forget that you’re a citizen of this world, and there are things you can do to lift the human spirit, things that are easy, things that are free, things that you can do every day. Civility, respect, kindness, character. You’re too good for schadenfreude, you’re too good for gossip and snark, you’re too good for intolerance—and since you’re walking into the middle of a presidential election, it’s worth mentioning that you’re too good to think people who disagree with you are your enemy. Unless they went to Georgetown, in which case, they can go to hell. (Laughter)

Don't ever forget that a small group of thoughtful people can change the world. It's the only thing that ever has.

Rehearsal's over. You're going out there now, you're going to do this thing. How you live matters. You're going to fall down, but the world doesn't care how many times you fall down, as long as it's one fewer than the number of times you get back up.

For the class of 2012, I wish you joy. I wish you health and happiness and success, I wish you a roof, four walls, a floor and someone in your life that you care about more than you care about yourself. Someone who makes you start saying "we" where before you used to say "I" and "us" where you used to say "me." I wish you the quality of friends I have and the quality of colleagues I work with. Baseball players say they don't have to look to see if they hit a home run, they can feel it. So I wish for you a moment—a moment soon—when you really put the bat on the ball, when you really get a hold of one and drive it into the upper deck, when you feel it. When you aim high and hit your target, when just for a moment all else disappears, and you soar with wings as eagles. The moment will end as quickly as it came, and so you'll have to have it back, and so you'll get it back no matter what the obstacles. A lofty prediction, to be sure, but I flat out guarantee it.

Today is May 13th, and today you graduate, and my friends, you ain't seen nothin' yet. Thank you, and congratulations.

Joss Whedon at Wesleyan University

May 26, 2013

Commencement address—it's going well, it's going well. Thank you, Jeanine, for...making me do this.

This is going to be great. This is going to be a good one. It's gonna go really well.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and... no. I'm not that lazy.

I actually sat through many graduations. When I was sitting where you guys were sitting, the speaker was Bill Cosby—funny man Bill Cosby, he was very funny and he was very brief, and I thanked him for that. He gave us a message that I really took with me, that a lot of us never forgot, about changing the world. He said, “you're not going to change the world, so don't try.”

That was it. He didn't buy that back at all. And then he complained about buying his daughter a car and we left. I remember thinking, “I think I can do better. I think I can be a little more inspiring than that.”

And so, what I'd like to say to all of you is that you are all going to die.

This is a good commencement speech because I'm figuring it's only going to go up from here. It can only get better, so this is good. It can't get more depressing. You have, in fact, already begun to die. You look great. Don't get me wrong. And you are youth and beauty. You are at the physical peak. Your bodies have just gotten off the ski slope on the peak of growth, potential, and now comes the black diamond mogul run to the grave. And the weird thing is your body wants to die. On a cellular level, that's what it wants. And that's probably not what you want.

I'm confronted by a great deal of grand and worthy ambition from this student body. You want to be a politician, a social worker. You want to be an artist. Your body's ambition: Mulch. Your body wants to make some babies and then go in the ground and fertilize things. That's it. And that seems like a bit of a contradiction. It doesn't seem fair. For one thing, we're telling you, “Go out into the world!” exactly when your body is saying, “Hey, let's bring it down a notch. Let's take it down.”

And it is a contradiction. And that's actually what I'd like to talk to you about. The contradiction between your body and your mind, between your mind and itself. I believe these contradictions and these tensions are the greatest gift that we have, and hopefully, I can explain that.

But first let me say when I talk about contradiction, I'm talking about something that is a constant in your life and in your identity, not just in your body but in your own mind, in ways that you may recognize or you may not.

Let's just say, hypothetically, that two roads diverged in the woods and you took the path less traveled. Part of you is just going, “Look at that path! Over there, it's much better. Everyone is traveling on it. It's paved, and there's like a Starbucks every 40 yards. This is wrong. In this one, there's nettles and Robert Frost's body—somebody should have moved that—it just feels weird. And not only does your mind tell you this, it is on that other path, it is behaving as though it is on that path. It is doing the opposite of what you are doing. And for your entire life, you will be doing, on some level, the opposite—not only of what you were doing—but of what you think you are. That is just going to go on. What you do with all your heart, you will do the opposite of. And what you need to do is to honor that, to understand it, to unearth it, to listen to this other voice.

You have, which is a rare thing, that ability and the responsibility to listen to the dissent in yourself, to at least give it the floor, because it is the key—not only to consciousness-but to real growth. To accept duality is to earn identity. And identity is something that you are constantly earning. It is not just who you are. It is a process that you must be active in. It's not just parroting your parents or the thoughts of your learned teachers. It is now more than ever about understanding yourself so you can become yourself.

I talk about this contradiction, and this tension, there's two things I want to say about it. One, it never goes away. And if you think that achieving something, if you think that solving something, if you think a career or a relationship will quiet that voice, it will not. If you think that happiness means total peace, you will never be happy. Peace comes from the acceptance of the part of you that can never be at peace. It will always be in conflict. If you accept that, everything gets a lot better.

The other reason is because you are establishing your identities and your beliefs, you need to argue yourself down, because somebody else will. Somebody's going to come at you, and whatever your belief, your idea, your ambition, somebody's going to question it. And unless you have first, you won't be able to answer back, you won't be able to hold your ground. You don't believe me, try taking a stand on just one leg. You need to see both sides.

Now, if you do, does this mean that you get to change the world? Well, I'm getting to that, so just chill. All I can say to this point is I think we can all agree that the world could use a little changing. I don't know if your parents have explained this to you about the world but... we broke it. I'm sorry... it's a bit of a mess. It's a hard time to go out there. And it's a weird time in our country.

The thing about our country is—oh, it's nice, I like it—it's not long on contradiction or ambiguity. It's not long on these kinds of things. It likes things to be simple, it likes things to be pigeonholed—good or bad, black or white, blue or red. And we're not that. We're more interesting than that. And the way that we go into the world understanding is to have these contradictions in ourselves and see them in other people and not judge them for it. To know that, in a world where debate has kind of fallen away and given way to shouting and bullying, that the best thing is not just the idea of honest debate, the best thing is losing the debate, because it means that you learn something and you changed your position. The only way really to understand your position and its worth is to understand the opposite. That doesn't mean the crazy guy on the radio who is spewing hate, it means the decent human truths of all the people who feel the need to listen to that guy. You are connected to those people. They're connected to him. You can't get away from it.

This connection is part of contradiction. It is the tension I was talking about. This tension isn't about two opposite points, it's about the line in between them, and it's being stretched by them. We need to acknowledge and honor that tension, and the connection that that tension is a part of. Our connection not just to the people we love, but to everybody, including people we can't stand and wish weren't around. The connection we have is part of what defines us on such a basic level.

Freedom is not freedom from connection. Serial killing is freedom from connection. Certain large investment firms have established freedom from connection. But we as people never do, and we're not supposed to, and we shouldn't want to. We are individuals, obviously, but we are more than that.

So here's the thing about changing the world. It turns out that's not even the question, because you don't have a choice. You are going to change the world, because that is actually what the world is. You do not pass through this life, it passes through you. You experience it, you interpret it, you act, and then it is different. That happens constantly. You are changing the world. You always have been, and now, it becomes real on a level that it hasn't been before.

And that's why I've been talking only about you and the tension within you, because you are—not in a clichéd sense, but in a weirdly literal sense—the future. After you walk up here and walk back down, you're going to be the present. You will be the broken world and the act of changing it, in a way that you haven't been before. You will be so many things, and the one thing that I wish I'd known and want to say is, don't just be yourself. Be all of yourselves. Don't just live. Be that other thing connected to death. Be life. Live all of your life. Understand it, see it, appreciate it. And have fun.

Shonda Rhimes at Dartmouth College

June 7, 2014

President Hanlon, faculty, staff, honored guests, parents, students, families and friends—good morning and congratulations to the Dartmouth graduating class of 2014!

So.

This is weird.

Me giving a speech. In general, I do not like giving speeches. Giving a speech requires standing in front of large groups of people while they look at you and it also requires talking. I can do the standing part OK. But the you looking and the me talking ... I am not a fan. I get this overwhelming feeling of fear. Terror, really. Dry mouth, heart beats superfast, everything gets a little bit slow motion. Like I might pass out. Or die. Or poop my pants or something. I mean, don't worry. I'm not going to pass out or die or poop my pants. Mainly because just by telling you that it could happen, I have somehow neutralized it as an option. Like as if saying it out loud casts some kind of spell where now it cannot possibly happen now. Vomit. I could vomit. See. Vomiting is now also off the table. Neutralized it. We're good.

Anyway, the point is. I do not like to give speeches. I'm a writer. I'm a TV writer. I like to write stuff for other people to say. I actually contemplated bringing Ellen Pompeo or Kerry Washington here to say my speech for me ... but my lawyer pointed out that when you drag someone across state lines against their will, the FBI comes looking for you, so...

I don't like giving speeches, in general, because of the fear and terror. But this speech? This speech, I really did not want to give.

A Dartmouth Commencement speech? Dry mouth. Heart beats so, so fast. Everything in slow motion. Pass out, die, poop.

Look, it would be fine if this were, 20 years ago. If it were back in the day when I graduated from Dartmouth. Twenty-three years ago, I was sitting right where you are now. And I was listening to Elizabeth Dole speak. And she was great. She was calm and she was confident. It was just ... different. It felt like she was just talking to a group of people. Like a fireside chat with friends. Just Liddy Dole and like 9,000 of her closest friends. Because it was 20 years ago. And she was just talking to a group of people.

Now? Twenty years later? This is no fireside chat. It's not just you and me. This speech is filmed and streamed and tweeted and uploaded. NPR has like, a whole site dedicated to Commencement speeches. A whole site just about commencement speeches. There are sites that rate them and mock them and dissect them. It's weird. And stressful. And kind of vicious if you're an introvert perfectionist writer who hates speaking in public in the first place.

When President Hanlon called me—and by the way, I would like to thank President Hanlon for asking me way back in January, thus giving me a full six months of terror and panic to enjoy. When President Hanlon called me, I almost said no. Almost.

Dry mouth. Heart beats so, so fast. Everything in slow motion. Pass out, die, poop.

But I'm here. I am gonna do it. I'm doing it. You know why?

Because I like a challenge. And because this year I made myself a promise that I was going to do the stuff that terrifies me. And because, 20-plus years ago when I was trudging uphill from the River Cluster through all that snow to get to the Hop for play rehearsal, I never imagined that I would one day be standing here, at the Old Pine lectern. Staring out at all of you. About to throw down on some wisdom in the Dartmouth Commencement address.

So, you know, yeah. Moments.

Also, I'm here because I really, really wanted some EBAs.

OK.

I want to say right now that every single time someone asked me what I was going to talk about in this speech, I would boldly and confidently tell them that I had all kinds wisdom to share. I was lying. I feel wildly unqualified to give you advice. There is no wisdom here. So all I can do is talk about some stuff that could maybe be useful to you, from one Dartmouth grad to another. Some stuff that won't ever show up in a Meredith Grey voiceover or a Papa Pope monologue. Some stuff I probably shouldn't be telling you here now because of the uploading and the streaming and the tweeting. But I am going to pretend that it is 20 years ago. That it's just you and me. That we're having a fireside chat. Screw the outside world and what they think. I've already said "poop" like five times already anyway ... things are getting real up in here.

OK, wait. Before I talk to you. I want to talk to your parents. Because the other thing about it being 20 years later is that I'm a mother now. So I know some things, some very different things. I have three girls. I've been to the show. You don't know what that means, but your parents do. You think this day is all about you. But your parents ... the people who raised you ... the people who endured you ... they potty trained you, they taught you to read, they survived you as a teenager, they have suffered 21 years and not once did they kill you. This day ... you call it your graduation day. But this day is not about you. This is their day. This is the day they take back their lives, this is the day they earn their freedom. This day is their Independence Day. So, parents, I salute you. And as I have an eight-month-old, I hope to join your ranks of freedom in 20 years!

OK. So here comes the real deal part of the speech, or you might call it, Some Random Stuff Some Random Alum Who Runs a TV Show Thinks I Should Know Before I Graduate:

You ready?

When people give these kinds of speeches, they usually tell you all kinds of wise and heartfelt things. They have wisdom to impart. They have lessons to share. They tell you: Follow your dreams. Listen to your spirit. Change the world. Make your mark. Find your inner voice and make it sing. Embrace failure. Dream. Dream and dream big. As a matter of fact, dream and don't stop dreaming until all of your dreams come true.

I think that's crap.

I think a lot of people dream. And while they are busy dreaming, the really happy people, the really successful people, the really interesting, engaged, powerful people, are busy doing.

The dreamers. They stare at the sky and they make plans and they hope and they talk about it endlessly. And they start a lot of sentences with "I want to be ..." or "I wish."

"I want to be a writer." "I wish I could travel around the world."

And they dream of it. The buttoned-up ones meet for cocktails and they brag about their dreams, and the hippie ones have vision boards and they meditate about their dreams. Maybe you write in journals about your dreams or discuss it endlessly with your best friend or your girlfriend or your mother. And it feels really good. You're talking about it, and you're planning it. Kind of. You are blue-skying your life. And that is what everyone says you should be doing. Right? I mean, that's what Oprah and Bill Gates did to get successful, right?

No.

Dreams are lovely. But they are just dreams. Fleeting, ephemeral, pretty. But dreams do not come true just because you dream them. It's hard work that makes things happen. It's hard work that creates change.

So, Lesson One, I guess is: Ditch the dream and be a doer, not a dreamer. Maybe you know exactly what it is you dream of being, or maybe you're paralyzed because you have no idea what your passion is. The truth is, it doesn't matter. You don't have to know. You just have to keep moving forward. You just have to keep doing something, seizing the next opportunity, staying open to trying something new. It doesn't have to fit your vision of the perfect job or the perfect life. Perfect is boring and dreams are not real. Just ... do. So you think, "I wish I could travel." Great. Sell your crappy car, buy a ticket to Bangkok, and go. Right now. I'm serious.

You want to be a writer? A writer is someone who writes every day, so start writing. You don't have a job? Get one. Any job. Don't sit at home waiting for the magical opportunity. Who are you? Prince William? No. Get a job. Go to work. Do something until you can do something else.

I did not dream of being a TV writer. Never, not once when I was here in the hallowed halls of the Ivy League, did I say to myself, "Self, I want to write TV."

You know what I wanted to be? I wanted to be Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison. That was my dream. I blue sky'd it like crazy. I dreamed and dreamed. And while I was dreaming, I was living in my sister's basement. Dreamers often end up living in the basements of relatives, FYI. Anyway, there I was in that basement, and I was dreaming of being Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison. And guess what? I couldn't be Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison, because Toni Morrison already had that job and she wasn't interested in giving it up. So one day I was sitting in that basement and I read an article that said—it was in The New York Times—and it said it was harder to get into USC Film School than it was to get into Harvard Law School. And I thought I could dream about being Toni Morrison, or I could do.

At film school, I discovered an entirely new way of telling stories. A way that suited me. A way that brought me joy. A way that flipped this switch in my brain and changed the way I saw the world. Years later, I had dinner with Toni Morrison. All she wanted to talk about was Grey's Anatomy. That never would have happened if I hadn't stopped dreaming of becoming her and gotten busy becoming myself.

Lesson Two. Lesson two is that tomorrow is going to be the worst day ever for you.

When I graduated from Dartmouth that day in 1991, when I was sitting right where you are and I was staring up at Elizabeth Dole speaking, I will admit that I have no idea what she was saying. Couldn't even listen to her. Not because I was overwhelmed or emotional or any of that. But because I had a serious hangover. Like, an epic painful hangover because (and here is where I apologize to President Hanlon because I know that you are trying to build a better and more responsible Dartmouth and I applaud you and I admire you and it is very necessary) but I was really freaking drunk the night before. And the reason I'd been so drunk the night before, the reason I'd done upside down margarita shots at Bones Gate was because I knew that after graduation, I was going to take off my cap and gown, my parents were going to

pack my stuff in the car and I was going to go home and probably never come back to Hanover again. And even if I did come back, it wouldn't matter because it wouldn't be the same because I didn't live here anymore.

On my graduation day, I was grieving.

My friends were celebrating. They were partying. They were excited. So happy. No more school, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks. And I was like, are you freaking kidding me? You get all the fro-yo you want here! The gym is free. The apartments in Manhattan are smaller than my suite in North Mass. Who cared if there was no place to get my hair done? All my friends are here. I have a theatre company here. I was grieving. I knew enough about how the world works, enough about how adulthood plays out, to be grieving.

Here's where I am going to embarrass myself and make you all feel maybe a little bit better about yourselves. I literally lay down on the floor of my dorm room and cried while my mother packed up my room. I refused to help her. Like, hell no I won't go. I nonviolent-protested leaving here. Like, went limp like a protestor, only without the chanting—it was really pathetic. If none of you lie down on a dirty hardwood floor and cry today while your mommy packs up your dorm room, you are already starting your careers out ahead of me. You are winning.

But here's the thing. The thing I really felt like I knew was that the real world sucks. And it is scary. College is awesome. You're special here. You're in the Ivy League, you are at the pinnacle of your life's goals at this point—your entire life up until now has been about getting into some great college and then graduating from that college. And now, today, you have done it. The moment you get out of college, you think you are going to take the world by storm. All doors will be opened to you. It's going to be laughter and diamonds and soirees left and right.

What really happens is that, to the rest of the world, you are now at the bottom of the heap. Maybe you're an intern, possibly a low-paid assistant. And it is awful. The real world, it sucked so badly for me. I felt like a loser all of the time. And more than a loser? I felt lost.

Which brings me to clarify lesson number two.

Tomorrow is going to be the worst day ever for you. But don't be an asshole.

Here's the thing. Yes, it is hard out there. But hard is relative. I come from a middle-class family, my parents are academics, I was born after the civil rights movement, I was a toddler during the women's movement, I live in the United States of America, all of which means I'm allowed to own my freedom, my rights, my voice, and my uterus; and I went to Dartmouth and I earned an Ivy League degree.

The lint in my navel that accumulated while I gazed at it as I suffered from feeling lost about how hard it was to not feel special after graduation ... that navel lint was embarrassed for me.

Elsewhere in the world, girls are harmed simply because they want to get an education. Slavery still exists. Children still die from malnutrition. In this country, we lose more people to handgun violence than any other nation in the world. Sexual assault against women in America is pervasive and disturbing and continues at an alarming rate.

So yes, tomorrow may suck for you—as it did for me. But as you stare at the lint in your navel, have some perspective. We are incredibly lucky. We have been given a gift. An incredible education has been placed before us. We ate all the fro-yo we could get our hands on. We skied. We had EBAs at 1 a.m. We

built bonfires and got frostbite and had all the free treadmills. We beer-ponged our asses off. Now it's time to pay it forward.

Find a cause you love. It's OK to pick just one. You are going to need to spend a lot of time out in the real world trying to figure out how to stop feeling like a lost loser, so one cause is good. Devote some time every week to it.

Oh. And while we are discussing this, let me say a thing. A hashtag is not helping. #yesallwomen #takebackthenight #notallmen #bringbackourgirls #StopPretendingHashtagsAreTheSameAsDoingSomething

Hashtags are very pretty on Twitter. I love them. I will hashtag myself into next week. But a hashtag is not a movement. A hashtag does not make you Dr. King. A hashtag does not change anything. It's a hashtag. It's you, sitting on your butt, typing on your computer and then going back to binge-watching your favorite show. I do it all the time. For me, it's Game of Thrones.

Volunteer some hours. Focus on something outside yourself. Devote a slice of your energies towards making the world suck less every week. Some people suggest doing this will increase your sense of well-being. Some say it's good karma. I say that it will allow you to remember that, whether you are a legacy or the first in your family to go to college, the air you are breathing right now is rare air. Appreciate it. Don't be an asshole.

Lesson number three.

So you're out there, and you're giving back and you're doing, and it's working. And life is good. You are making it. You're a success. And it's exciting and it's great. At least it is for me. I love my life. I have three TV shows at work and I have three daughters at home. And it's all amazing, and I am truly happy. And people are constantly asking me, how do you do it?

And usually, they have this sort of admiring and amazed tone.

Shonda, how do you do it all?

Like I'm full of magical magic and special wisdom-ness or something.

How do you do it all?

And I usually just smile and say like, "I'm really organized." Or if I'm feeling slightly kindly, I say, "I have a lot of help."

And those things are true. But they also are not true.

And this is the thing that I really want to say. To all of you. Not just to the women out there. Although this will matter to you women a great deal as you enter the work force and try to figure out how to juggle work and family. But it will also matter to the men, who I think increasingly are also trying to figure out how to juggle work and family. And frankly, if you aren't trying to figure it out, men of Dartmouth, you should be. Fatherhood is being redefined at a lightning-fast rate. You do not want to be a dinosaur.

So women and men of Dartmouth: As you try to figure out the impossible task of juggling work and family and you hear over and over and over again that you just need a lot of help or you just need to be organized or you just need to try just a little bit harder ... as a very successful woman, a single mother of three, who constantly gets asked the question "How do you do it all?" For once I am going to answer that

question with 100 percent honesty here for you now. Because it's just us. Because it's our fireside chat. Because somebody has to tell you the truth.

Shonda, how do you do it all?

The answer is this: I don't.

Whenever you see me somewhere succeeding in one area of my life, that almost certainly means I am failing in another area of my life.

If I am killing it on a *Scandal* script for work, I am probably missing bath and story time at home. If I am at home sewing my kids' Halloween costumes, I'm probably blowing off a rewrite I was supposed to turn in. If I am accepting a prestigious award, I am missing my baby's first swim lesson. If I am at my daughter's debut in her school musical, I am missing Sandra Oh's last scene ever being filmed at *Grey's Anatomy*. If I am succeeding at one, I am inevitably failing at the other. That is the tradeoff. That is the Faustian bargain one makes with the devil that comes with being a powerful working woman who is also a powerful mother. You never feel a hundred percent OK; you never get your sea legs; you are always a little nauseous. Something is always lost.

Something is always missing.

And yet. I want my daughters to see me and know me as a woman who works. I want that example set for them. I like how proud they are when they come to my offices and know that they come to Shondaland. There is a land and it is named after their mother. In their world, mothers run companies. In their world, mothers own Thursday nights. In their world, mothers work. And I am a better mother for it. The woman I am because I get to run Shondaland, because I get to write all day, because I get to spend my days making things up, that woman is a better person—and a better mother. Because that woman is happy. That woman is fulfilled. That woman is whole. I wouldn't want them to know the me who didn't get to do this all day long. I wouldn't want them to know the me who wasn't doing.

Lesson Number Three is that anyone who tells you they are doing it all perfectly is a liar.

OK.

I fear I've scared you or been a little bit bleak, and that was not my intention. It is my hope that you run out of here, excited, leaning forward, into the wind, ready to take the world by storm. That would be so very fabulous. For you to do what everyone expects of you. For you to just go be exactly the picture of hardcore Dartmouth awesome.

My point, I think, is that it is OK if you don't. My point is that it can be scary to graduate. That you can lie on the hardwood floor of your dorm room and cry while your mom packs up your stuff. That you can have an impossible dream to be Toni Morrison that you have to let go of. That every day you can feel like you might be failing at work or at your home life. That the real world is hard.

And yet, you can still wake up every single morning and go, "I have three amazing kids and I have created work I am proud of, and I absolutely love my life and I would not trade it for anyone else's life ever."

You can still wake up one day and find yourself living a life you never even imagined dreaming of.

My dreams did not come true. But I worked really hard. And I ended up building an empire out of my imagination. So my dreams? Can suck it.

You can wake up one day and find that you are interesting and powerful and engaged. You can wake up one day and find that you are a doer.

You can be sitting right where you are now. Looking up at me. Probably—hopefully, I pray for you—hung over. And then 20 years from now, you can wake up and find yourself in the Hanover Inn full of fear and terror because you are going to give the Commencement speech. Dry mouth. Heart beats so, so fast. Everything in slow motion. Pass out, die, poop.

Which one of you will it be? Which member of the 2014 class is going to find themselves standing up here? Because I checked and it is pretty rare for an alum to speak here. It's pretty much just me and Robert Frost and Mr. Rogers, which is crazy awesome.

Which one of you is going to make it up here? I really hope that it's one of you. Seriously.

When it happens, you'll know what this feels like.

Dry mouth. Heart beats so, so fast. Everything moves in slow motion.

Graduates, every single one of you, be proud of your accomplishments. Make good on your diplomas.

You are no longer students. You are no longer works in progress. You are now citizens of the real world. You have a responsibility to become a person worthy of joining and contributing to society. Because who you are today ... that's who you are.

So be brave.

Be amazing.

Be worthy.

And every single time you get a chance?

Stand up in front of people.

Let them see you. Speak. Be heard.

Go ahead and have the dry mouth.

Let your heart beat so, so fast.

Watch everything move in slow motion.

So what?

You what?

You pass out, you die, you poop?

No.

And this is really the only lesson you'll ever need to know ...

You take it in.

You breathe this rare air.

You feel alive.

You be yourself.

You truly finally always be yourself.

Thank you. Good luck.

Steven Spielberg at Harvard University

May 26, 2016

Thank you, thank you, President Faust, and Paul Choi, thank you so much. It's an honor and a thrill to address this group of distinguished alumni and supportive friends and kvelling parents. We've all gathered to share in the joy of this day, so please join me in congratulating Harvard's Class of 2016.

I can remember my own college graduation, which is easy, since it was only 14 years ago. How many of you took 37 years to graduate? Because, like most of you, I began college in my teens, but sophomore year, I was offered my dream job at Universal Studios, so I dropped out. I told my parents if my movie career didn't go well, I'd re-enroll. It went all right.

But eventually, I returned for one big reason. Most people go to college for an education, and some go for their parents, but I went for my kids. I'm the father of seven, and I kept insisting on the importance of going to college, but I hadn't walked the walk. So, in my fifties, I re-enrolled at Cal State, Long Beach, and I earned my degree.

I just have to add: It helped that they gave me course credit in paleontology for the work I did on Jurassic Park. That's three units for Jurassic Park, thank you.

Well, I left college because I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and some of you know, too — but some of you don't. Or maybe you thought you knew but are now questioning that choice. Maybe you're sitting there trying to figure out how to tell your parents that you want to be a doctor and not a comedy writer.

Well, what you choose to do next is what we call in the movies the *character-defining moment*. Now, these are moments you're very familiar with, like in the last Star Wars: The Force Awakens, when Rey realizes the force is with her, or Indiana Jones choosing mission over fear by jumping into a pile of snakes.

Now in a two-hour movie, you get a handful of character-defining moments, but in real life, you face them every day. Life is one strong, long string of character-defining moments. And I was lucky that at 18 I knew what I exactly wanted to do. But I didn't know who I was. How could I? And how could any of us? Because for the first 25 years of our lives, we are trained to listen to voices that are not our own. Parents and professors fill our heads with wisdom and information, and then employers and mentors take their place and explain how this world really works.

And usually these voices of authority make sense, but sometimes, doubt starts to creep into our heads and into our hearts. And even when we think, *'that's not quite how I see the world,'* it's kind of easier to just to nod in agreement and go along, and for a while, I let that going along define my character. Because I was repressing my own point of view, because like in that Nilsson song, *"Everybody was talkin' at me, so I couldn't hear the echoes of my mind."*

And at first, the internal voice I needed to listen to was hardly audible, and it was hardly noticeable — kind of like me in high school. But then I started paying more attention, and my intuition kicked in.

And I want to be clear that your intuition is different from your conscience. They work in tandem, but here's the distinction: Your conscience shouts, *"here's what you should do,"* while your intuition whispers, *"here's what you could do."* Listen to that voice that tells you what *you could do*. Nothing will define your character more than that.

Because once I turned to my intuition, and I tuned into it, certain projects began to pull me into them, and others, I turned away from. And up until the 1980s, my movies were mostly, I guess what you could call *escapist*. And I don't dismiss any of these movies — not even 1941. Not even that one. And many of these early films reflected the values that I cared deeply about, and I still do. But I was in a celluloid bubble, because I'd cut my education short, my worldview was limited to what I could dream up in my head, not what the world could teach me.

But then I directed *The Color Purple*. And this one film opened my eyes to experiences that I never could have imagined, and yet were all too real. This story was filled with deep pain and deeper truths, like when Shug Avery says, "*Everything wants to be loved.*" My gut, which was my intuition, told me that more people needed to meet these characters and experience these truths. And while making that film, I realized that a movie could also be a mission. I hope all of you find that sense of mission. Don't turn away from what's painful. Examine it. Challenge it.

My job is to create a world that lasts two hours. Your job is to create a world that lasts forever. You are the future innovators, motivators, leaders and caretakers. And the way you create a better future is by studying the past. Jurassic Park writer Michael Crichton, who graduated from both this college and this medical school, liked to quote a favorite professor of his who said that if you didn't know history, you didn't know anything. You were a leaf that didn't know it was part of a tree. So history majors: Good choice, you're in great shape — NOT in the job market, but culturally.

The rest of us have to make a little effort. Social media that we're inundated and swarmed with is about the here and now. But I've been fighting and fighting inside my own family to get all my kids to look behind them, to look at what already has happened. Because to understand who they are is to understand who we were, and who their grandparents were, and then, what this country was like when they emigrated here. We are a nation of immigrants — at least for now.

So to me, this means we all have to tell our own stories. We have so many stories to tell. Talk to your parents and your grandparents, if you can, and ask them about their stories. And I promise you, like I have promised my kids, you will not be bored. And that's why I so often make movies based on real-life events. I look to history not to be didactic, because that's just a bonus, but I look because the past is filled with the greatest stories that have ever been told. Heroes and villains are not literary constructs, but they're at the heart of all history.

And again, this is why it's so important to listen to your internal whisper. It's the same one that compelled Abraham Lincoln and Oskar Schindler to make the correct moral choices. In your defining moments, do not let your morals be swayed by convenience or expediency. Sticking to your character requires a lot of courage. And to be courageous, you're going to need a lot of support.

And if you're lucky, you have parents like mine. I consider my mom my lucky charm. And when I was 12 years old, my father handed me a movie camera, the tool that allowed me to make sense of this world. And I am so grateful to him for that. And I am grateful that he's here at Harvard, sitting right down there.

My dad is 99 years old, which means he's only one year younger than Widener Library. But unlike Widener, he's had zero cosmetic work. And dad, there's a lady behind you, also 99, and I'll introduce you after this is over, okay?

But look, if your family's not always available, there's backup. Near the end of *It's a Wonderful Life* — you remember that movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*? Clarence the Angel inscribes a book with this: "*No man*

is a failure who has friends.” And I hope you hang on to the friendships you’ve made here at Harvard. And among your friends, I hope you find someone you want to share your life with.

I imagine some of you in this yard may be a tad cynical, but I want to be unapologetically sentimental. I spoke about the importance of intuition and how there’s no greater voice to follow. That is, until you meet the love of your life. And this is what happened when I met and married Kate, and that became the greatest character-defining moment of my life. Love, support, courage, intuition. All of these things are in your hero’s quiver, but still, a hero needs one more thing: A hero needs a villain to vanquish. And you’re all in luck. This world is full of monsters. And there’s racism, homophobia, ethnic hatred, class hatred, there’s political hatred, and there’s religious hatred.

As a kid, I was bullied for being Jewish. This was upsetting, but compared to what my parents and grandparents had faced, it felt tame. Because we truly believed that anti-Semitism was fading. And we were wrong. Over the last two years, nearly 20,000 Jews have left Europe to find higher ground. And earlier this year, I was at the Israeli embassy when President Obama stated the sad truth. He said: *“We must confront the reality that around the world, anti-Semitism is on the rise. We cannot deny it.”*

My own desire to confront that reality compelled me to start, in 1994, the Shoah Foundation. And since then, we’ve spoken to over 53,000 Holocaust survivors and witnesses in 63 countries and taken all their video testimonies. And we’re now gathering testimonies from genocides in Rwanda, Cambodia, Armenia and Nanking. Because we must never forget that the inconceivable doesn’t happen — it happens frequently. Atrocities are happening right now. And so we wonder not just, *when will this hatred end?* but, *how did it begin?*

Now, I don’t have to tell a crowd of Red Sox fans that we are wired for tribalism. But beyond rooting for the home team, tribalism has a much darker side. Instinctively and maybe even genetically, we divide the world into ‘us’ and ‘them.’ So the burning question must be: How do all of us together find the ‘we’? How do we do that? There’s still so much work to be done, and sometimes I feel the work hasn’t even begun. And it’s not just anti-Semitism that’s surging — Islamophobia’s on the rise, too. Because there’s no difference between anyone who is discriminated against, whether it’s the Muslims, or the Jews, or minorities on the border states, or the LGBT community — it is all big one hate.

And to me, and, I think, to all of you, the only answer to more hate is more humanity. We got to repair — we have to replace fear with curiosity. ‘Us’ and ‘them’ — we’ll find the ‘we’ by connecting with each other. And by believing that we’re members of the same tribe. And by feeling empathy for every soul — even Yalies.

My son graduated from Yale, thank you.

But make sure this empathy isn’t just something that you feel. Make it something you act upon. That means vote. Peaceably protest. Speak up for those who can’t and speak up for those who may be shouting but aren’t being heard. Let your conscience shout as loud as it wants if you’re using it in the service of others.

And as an example of action in service of others, you need to look no further than this Hollywood-worthy backdrop of Memorial Church. Its south wall bears the names of Harvard alumni — like President Faust has already mentioned — students and faculty members, who gave their lives in World War II. All told, 697 souls, who once tread the ground where stand now, were lost. And at a service in this church in late 1945, Harvard President James Conant — which President Faust also mentioned — honored the brave and called upon the community to *‘reflect the radiance of their deeds.’*

Seventy years later, this message still holds true. Because their sacrifice is not a debt that can be repaid in a single generation. It must be repaid with every generation. Just as we must never forget the atrocities, we must never forget those who fought for freedom. So as you leave this college and head out into the world, continue please to *'reflect the radiance of their deeds,'* or as Captain Miller in Saving Private Ryan would say, *"Earn this."*

And please stay connected. Please never lose eye contact. This may not be a lesson you want to hear from a person who creates media, but we are spending more time looking down at our devices than we are looking in each other's eyes. So, forgive me, but let's start right now. Everyone here, please find someone's eyes to look into. Students, and alumni and you too, President Faust, all of you, turn to someone you don't know or don't know very well. They may be standing behind you, or a couple of rows ahead. Just let your eyes meet. That's it. That emotion you're feeling is our shared humanity mixed in with a little social discomfort.

But, if you remember nothing else from today, I hope you remember this moment of human connection. And I hope you all had a lot of that over the past four years. Because today you start down the path of becoming the generation on which the next generation stands. And I've imagined many possible futures in my films, but you will determine the actual future. And I hope that it's filled with justice and peace.

And finally, I wish you all a true, Hollywood-style happy ending. I hope you outrun the T. rex, catch the criminal and for your parents' sake, maybe every now and then, just like E.T.: Go home. Thank you.

The Leaders

Franklin D. Roosevelt – 1940 – University of Virginia

Dwight D. Eisenhower – 1953 – Dartmouth College

John F. Kennedy – 1963 – American University

Ronald Reagan – 1981 – University of Notre Dame

Barack Obama – 2016 – Rutgers University

If you know of any commencement speeches you think I'd like or have any thoughts on categories I've missed, please email at kevin@12mv2.com with the subject "Commencement Speeches you may like." Thank you!

[More Compilations](#)

Franklin D. Roosevelt at University of Virginia

June 10, 1940

President Newcomb, my friends of the University of Virginia:

I notice by the program that I am asked to address the class of 1940. I avail myself of that privilege. But I also take this very apt occasion to speak to many other classes that have graduated through all the years, classes that are still in the period of study, not alone in the schools of learning of the Nation, but classes that have come up through the great schools of experience; in other words a cross section of the country, just as you who graduate today are a cross section of the Nation as a whole.

Every generation of young men and women in America has questions to ask the world. Most of the time they are the simple but nevertheless difficult questions, questions of work to do, opportunities to find, ambitions to satisfy.

But every now and again in the history of the Republic a different kind of question presents itself-a question that asks, not about the future of an individual or even of a generation, but about the future of the country, the future of the American people.

There was such a time at the beginning of our history as a Nation. Young people asked themselves in those days what lay ahead, not for themselves, but for the new United States.

There was such a time again in the seemingly endless years of the War Between the States. Young men and young women on both sides of the line asked themselves, not what trades or professions they would enter, what lives they would make, but what was to become of the country they had known.

There is such a time again today. Again today the young men and the young women of America ask themselves with earnestness and with deep concern this same question: "What is to become of the country we know?"

Now they ask it with even greater anxiety than before. They ask, not only what the future holds for this Republic, but what the future holds for all peoples and all nations that have been living under democratic forms of Government-under the free institutions of a free people.

It is understandable to all of us that they should ask this question. They read the words of those who are telling them that the ideal of individual liberty, the ideal of free franchise, the ideal of peace through justice, are decadent ideals. They read the word and hear the boast of those who say that a belief in force-force directed by self-chosen leaders-is the new and vigorous system which will overrun the earth. They have seen the ascendancy of this philosophy of force in nation after nation where free institutions and individual liberties were once maintained.

It is natural and understandable that the younger generation should first ask itself what the extension of the philosophy of force to all the world would lead to ultimately. We see today in stark reality some of the consequences of what we call the machine age.

Where control of machines has been retained in the hands of mankind as a whole, untold benefits have accrued to mankind. For mankind was then the master; and the machine was the servant.

But in this new system of force the mastery of the machine is not in the hands of mankind. It is in the control of infinitely small groups of individuals who rule without a single one of the democratic sanctions that we have known. The machine in hands of irresponsible conquerors becomes the master; mankind is

not only the servant; it is the victim, too. Such mastery abandons with deliberate contempt all the moral values to which even this young country for more than three hundred years has been accustomed and dedicated.

Surely the new philosophy proves from month to month that it could have no possible conception of the way of life or the way of thought of a nation whose origins go back to Jamestown and Plymouth Rock.

Conversely, neither those who spring from that ancient stock nor those who have come hither in later years can be indifferent to the destruction of freedom in their ancestral lands across the sea.

Perception of danger to our institutions may come slowly or it may come with a rush and a shock as it has to the people of the United States in the past few months. This perception of danger has come to us clearly and overwhelmingly; and we perceive the peril in a world-wide arena-an arena that may become so narrowed that only the Americas will retain the ancient faiths.

Some indeed still hold to the now somewhat obvious delusion that we of the United States can safely permit the United States to become a lone island, a lone island in a world dominated by the philosophy of force.

Such an island may be the dream of those who still talk and vote as isolationists. Such an island represents to me and to the overwhelming majority of Americans today a helpless nightmare of a people without freedom-the nightmare of a people lodged in prison, handcuffed, hungry, and fed through the bars from day to day by the contemptuous, unpitying masters of other continents.

It is natural also that we should ask ourselves how now we can prevent the building of that prison and the placing of ourselves in the midst of it.

Let us not hesitate-all of us-to proclaim certain truths. Overwhelmingly we, as a nation-and this applies to all the other American nations-are convinced that military and naval victory for the gods of force and hate would endanger the institutions of democracy in the western world, and that equally, therefore, the whole of our sympathies lies with those nations that are giving their life blood in combat against these forces.

The people and the Government of the United States have seen with the utmost regret and with grave disquiet the decision of the Italian Government to engage in the hostilities now raging in Europe.

More than three months ago the Chief of the Italian Government sent me word that because of the determination of Italy to limit, so far as might be possible, the spread of the European conflict, more than two hundred millions of people in the region of the Mediterranean had been enabled to escape the suffering and the 'devastation of war.

I informed the Chief of the Italian Government that this desire on the part of Italy to prevent the war from spreading met with full sympathy and response on the part of the Government and the people of the United States, and I expressed the earnest hope of this Government and of this people that this policy on the part of Italy might be continued. I made it clear that in the opinion of the Government of the United States any extension of hostilities in the region of the Mediterranean might result in a still greater enlargement of the scene of the conflict, the conflict in the Near East and in Africa and that if this came to pass no one could foretell how much greater the theater of the war eventually might become.

Again on a subsequent occasion, not so long ago, recognizing that certain aspirations of Italy might form the basis of discussions among the powers most specifically concerned, I offered, in a message addressed to the Chief of the Italian Government, to send to the Governments of France and of Great Britain such specific indications of the desires of Italy to obtain readjustments with regard to her position as the Chief

of the Italian Government might desire to transmit through me. While making it clear that the Government of the United States in such an event could not and would not assume responsibility for the nature of the proposals submitted nor for agreements which might thereafter be reached, I proposed that if Italy would refrain from entering the war I would be willing to ask assurances from the other powers concerned that they would faithfully execute any agreement so reached and that Italy's voice in any future peace conference would have the same authority as if Italy had actually taken part in the war, as a belligerent.

Unfortunately to the regret of all of us and the regret of humanity, the Chief of the Italian Government was unwilling to accept the procedure suggested and he has made no counter proposal.

This Government directed its efforts to doing what it could to work for the preservation of peace in the Mediterranean area, and it likewise expressed its willingness to endeavor to cooperate with the Government of Italy when the appropriate occasion arose for the creation of a more stable world order, through the reduction of armaments, and through the construction of a more liberal international economic system which would assure to all powers equality of opportunity in the world's markets and in the securing of raw materials on equal terms.

I have likewise, of course, felt it necessary in my communications to Signor Mussolini to express the concern of the Government of the United States because of the fact that any extension of the war in the region of the Mediterranean would inevitably result in great prejudice to the ways of life and Government and to the trade and commerce of all the American Republics.

The Government of Italy has now chosen to preserve what it terms its "freedom of action" and to fulfill what it states are its promises to Germany. In so doing it has manifested disregard for the rights and security of other nations, disregard for the lives of the peoples of those nations which are directly threatened by this spread of the war; and has evidenced its unwillingness to find the means through pacific negotiations for the satisfaction of what it believes are its legitimate aspirations.

On this tenth day of June, nineteen hundred and forty, the hand that held the dagger has struck it into the back of its neighbor.

On this tenth day of June, nineteen hundred and forty, in this University founded by the first great American teacher of democracy, we send forth our prayers and our hopes to those beyond the seas who are maintaining with magnificent valor their battle for freedom.

In our American unity, we will pursue two obvious and simultaneous courses; we will extend to the opponents of force the material resources of this nation; and, at the same time, we will harness and speed up the use of those resources in order that we ourselves in the Americas may have equipment and training equal to the task of any emergency and every defense.

All roads leading to the accomplishment of these objectives must be kept clear of obstructions. We will not slow down or detour. Signs and signals call for speed-full speed ahead.

It is right that each new generation should ask questions. But in recent months the principal question has been somewhat simplified. Once more the future of the nation and of the American people is at stake.

We need not and we will not, in any way, abandon our continuing effort to make democracy work within our borders. We still insist on the need for vast improvements in our own social and economic life. But that is a component part of national defense itself.

The program unfolds swiftly and into that program will fit the responsibility and the opportunity of every man and woman in the land to preserve his and her heritage in days of peril.

I call for effort, courage, sacrifice, devotion. Granting the love of freedom, all of these are possible.

And the love of freedom is still fierce and steady in the nation today.

Dwight D. Eisenhower at Dartmouth College

June 14, 1953

President Dickey, Secretary Pearson, members of Dartmouth's family and their friends:

Your president possesses a brash bravery approaching foolhardiness when he gives to me this platform in front of such an audience, with no other admonition except to speak informally, and giving me no limits of any other kind.

He has forgotten, I think, that old soldiers love to reminisce, and that they are, in addition, notoriously garrulous. But I have certain limitations of my own I learned throughout these many years, and I think they will serve to keep me from offending too deeply. But even if I do offend, I beg, in advance, the pardon of those families and friends, sweethearts that are waiting to greet these new graduates with a chaste handshake of congratulations, and assure you that any overstaying of my time was unintentional and just merely a product of my past upbringing.

First, I could not pass this occasion without the traditional congratulations to this Class, the completion of 4 years of arduous work at a college of such standing as Dartmouth, and of which there is no higher.

Next, I think I may be pardoned if I congratulate you on the quality of the addresses you have heard today up to this moment. I think that your commencement address and the two valedictory addresses established a standard that could well be one to be emulated even here in the future.

Now, with your permission, I want to talk about two points--two qualities--today that are purely personal. I am not going to be an exhorter, as Secretary Pearson has said. I want to talk about these two things and merely suggest to you certain ideas concerning them.

I am going to talk about fun--joy--happiness, just fun in life. I am going to talk a little about courage.

Now, as to fun: to get myself straight at once, for fear that in my garrulous way I might stray from my point, I shall say this: unless each day can be looked back upon by an individual as one in which he has had some fun, some joy, some real satisfaction, that day is a loss. It is un-Christian and wicked, in my opinion, to allow such a thing to occur.

Now, there are many, many different things and thoughts and ideas that will contribute--any acts of your own--that will contribute to the fun you have out of life. You can go along the bank of a stream in the tropics, and there is a crocodile lying in the sun. He looks the picture of contentment. They tell me that often they live to be a great age--a hundred years or more--and still lying in the sun and that is all they do.

Now, by going to Dartmouth, by coming this far along the road, you have achieved certain standards. One of those standards is: it is no longer so easy for you to have fun, and you can't be like a crocodile and sleep away your life and be satisfied. You must do something, and normally it must involve others, something you do for them. The satisfaction--it's trite but it's true--the satisfaction of a clear conscience, no matter what happens.

You can get a lot of fun out of shooting a good game of golf. But you wouldn't have the slightest fun out of it if you knew to achieve that first 79--you broke 80 today--if you did it by teeing up in the rough or taking the slightest advantage anywhere, and no one else in the world but you knew it. That game would never be a 79 to you, and so it was not worth while because you had no fun doing it.

Whatever you do--a little help to someone along the road--something you have achieved because you worked hard for it, like your graduation diploma today, those things have become worth while, and in your own estimation will contribute to your happiness. They will measure up to your standards because your standards have become those that only you know, but they have become very high. And if you do those things, they are the kind of things that will satisfy you and make life something that is joyous, that will cause your face to spread out a little, instead of going this way [indicating a long face]. There's too much of that in the world, anyway.

You are leaders. You are bound to be leaders because you have had advantages that make you leader to someone, whether you know it or not. There will be tough problems to solve. You have heard about them. You can't solve them with long faces--they don't solve problems, not when they deal with humans. Humans have to have confidence. You have got to help give it to them.

This brings me up to my second little topic, which is courage. I forget the author, but one many years ago, you know, uttered that famous saying, "The coward dies a thousand deaths, but the brave man dies but once." In other words, you can live happily if you have courage, because you are not fearing something that you can't help.

You must have courage to look at all about you with honest eyes--above all, yourself. And we go back to our standards. Have you actually measured up? If you have, it is that courage to look at yourself and say, well, I failed miserably there, I hurt someone's feelings needlessly, I lost my temper--which you must never do except deliberately. You did not measure up to your own standards.

Now, if you have the courage to look at yourself, soon you begin to achieve a code or a pattern that is closer to your own standards. By the same token, look at all that is dear to you: your own family. Of course, your children are going to be the greatest, the most extraordinary that ever lived. But, also, look at them as they are, occasionally.

Look at your country. Here is a country of which we are proud, as you are proud of Dartmouth and all about you, and the families to which you belong. But this country is a long way from perfection--a long way. We have the disgrace of racial discrimination, or we have prejudice against people because of their religion. We have crime on the docks. We have not had the courage to uproot these things, although we know they are wrong. And we with our standards, the standards given us at places like Dartmouth, we know they are wrong.

Now, that courage is not going to be satisfied--your sense of satisfaction is not going to be satisfied, if you haven't the courage to look at these things and do your best to help correct them, because that is the contribution you shall make to this beloved country in your time. Each of us, as he passes along, should strive to add something.

It is not enough merely to say I love America, and to salute the flag and take off your hat as it goes by, and to help sing the Star Spangled Banner. Wonderful! We love to do them, and our hearts swell with pride, because those who went before you worked to give to us today, standing here, this pride.

And this is a pride in an institution that we think has brought great happiness, and we know has brought great contentment and freedom of soul to many people. But it is not yet done. You must add to it.

Don't join the book burners. Don't think you are going to conceal faults by concealing evidence that they ever existed. Don't be afraid to go in your library and read every book, as long as that document does not offend our own ideas of decency. That should be the only censorship.

How will we defeat communism unless we know what it is, and what it teaches, and why does it have such an appeal for men, why are so many people swearing allegiance to it? It is almost a religion, albeit one of the nether regions.

And we have got to fight it with something better, not try to conceal the thinking of our own people. They are part of America. And even if they think ideas that are contrary to ours, their right to say them, their right to record them, and their right to have them at places where they are accessible to others is unquestioned, or it isn't America.

I fear I have already violated my promise not to stay too long and not to exhort. I could not, though, go back to that chair without saying that my sense of distinction in Dartmouth's honorary doctorate, in the overgenerous--extravagantly overgenerous remarks of your president in awarding me that doctorate, in the present of the cane from the young men of the graduating class--all of these things are very precious to me.

I have been fortunate in that my life has been spent with America's young men, probably one of the finest things that has happened to me in a very long life.

I thank you again for this.

John F. Kennedy at American University

June 10, 1963

President Anderson, members of the faculty, board of trustees, distinguished guests, my old colleague, Senator Bob Byrd, who has earned his degree through many years of attending night law school, while I am earning mine in the next 30 minutes, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is with great pride that I participate in this ceremony of the American University, sponsored by the Methodist Church, founded by Bishop John Fletcher Hurst, and first opened by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914. This is a young and growing university, but it has already fulfilled Bishop Hurst's enlightened hope for the study of history and public affairs in a city devoted to the making of history and the conduct of the public's business. By sponsoring this institution of higher learning for all who wish to learn, whatever their color or their creed, the Methodists of this area and the Nation deserve the Nation's thanks, and I commend all those who are today graduating.

Professor Woodrow Wilson once said that every man sent out from a university should be a man of his nation as well as a man of his time, and I am confident that the men and women who carry the honor of graduating from this institution will continue to give from their lives, from their talents, a high measure of public service and public support.

"There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university," wrote John Masefield in his tribute to English universities--and his words are equally true today. He did not refer to spires and towers, to campus greens and ivied walls. He admired the splendid beauty of the university, he said, because it was "a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see."

I have, therefore, chosen this time and this place to discuss a topic on which ignorance too often abounds and the truth is too rarely perceived--yet it is the most important topic on earth: world peace.

What kind of peace do I mean? What kind of peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children--not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women--not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.

I speak of peace because of the new face of war. Total war makes no sense in an age when great powers can maintain large and relatively invulnerable nuclear forces and refuse to surrender without resort to those forces. It makes no sense in an age when a single nuclear weapon contains almost ten times the explosive force delivered by all the allied air forces in the Second World War. It makes no sense in an age when the deadly poisons produced by a nuclear exchange would be carried by wind and water and soil and seed to the far corners of the globe and to generations yet unborn.

Today the expenditure of billions of dollars every year on weapons acquired for the purpose of making sure we never need to use them is essential to keeping the peace. But surely the acquisition of such idle stockpiles--which can only destroy and never create--is not the only, much less the most efficient, means of assuring peace.

I speak of peace, therefore, as the necessary rational end of rational men. I realize that the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war--and frequently the words of the pursuer fall on deaf ears. But we have no more urgent task.

[More Compilations](#)

Some say that it is useless to speak of world peace or world law or world disarmament--and that it will be useless until the leaders of the Soviet Union adopt a more enlightened attitude. I hope they do. I believe we can help them do it. But I also believe that we must reexamine our own attitude--as individuals and as a Nation--for our attitude is as essential as theirs. And every graduate of this school, every thoughtful citizen who despairs of war and wishes to bring peace, should begin by looking inward--by examining his own attitude toward the possibilities of peace, toward the Soviet Union, toward the course of the cold war and toward freedom and peace here at home.

First: Let us examine our attitude toward peace itself. Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable--that mankind is doomed--that we are gripped by forces we cannot control.

We need not accept that view. Our problems are manmade--therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable--and we believe they can do it again.

I am not referring to the absolute, infinite concept of peace and good will of which some fantasies and fanatics dream. I do not deny the value of hopes and dreams but we merely invite discouragement and incredulity by making that our only and immediate goal.

Let us focus instead on a more practical, more attainable peace-- based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions--on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements which are in the interest of all concerned. There is no single, simple key to this peace--no grand or magic formula to be adopted by one or two powers. Genuine peace must be the product of many nations, the sum of many acts. It must be dynamic, not static, changing to meet the challenge of each new generation. For peace is a process--a way of solving problems.

With such a peace, there will still be quarrels and conflicting interests, as there are within families and nations. World peace, like community peace, does not require that each man love his neighbor--it requires only that they live together in mutual tolerance, submitting their disputes to a just and peaceful settlement. And history teaches us that enmities between nations, as between individuals, do not last forever. However fixed our likes and dislikes may seem, the tide of time and events will often bring surprising changes in the relations between nations and neighbors.

So let us persevere. Peace need not be impracticable, and war need not be inevitable. By defining our goal more clearly, by making it seem more manageable and less remote, we can help all peoples to see it, to draw hope from it, and to move irresistibly toward it.

Second: Let us reexamine our attitude toward the Soviet Union. It is discouraging to think that their leaders may actually believe what their propagandists write. It is discouraging to read a recent authoritative Soviet text on Military Strategy and find, on page after page, wholly baseless and incredible claims--such as the allegation that "American imperialist circles are preparing to unleash different types of wars . . . that there is a very real threat of a preventive war being unleashed by American imperialists against the Soviet Union . . . [and that] the political aims of the American imperialists are to enslave economically and politically the European and other capitalist countries . . . [and] to achieve world domination . . . by means of aggressive wars."

Truly, as it was written long ago: "The wicked flee when no man pursueth." Yet it is sad to read these Soviet statements--to realize the extent of the gulf between us. But it is also a warning--a warning to the American people not to fall into the same trap as the Soviets, not to see only a distorted and desperate

view of the other side, not to see conflict as inevitable, accommodation as impossible, and communication as nothing more than an exchange of threats.

No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue. As Americans, we find communism profoundly repugnant as a negation of personal freedom and dignity. But we can still hail the Russian people for their many achievements--in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture and in acts of courage.

Among the many traits the peoples of our two countries have in common, none is stronger than our mutual abhorrence of war. Almost unique among the major world powers, we have never been at war with each other. And no nation in the history of battle ever suffered more than the Soviet Union suffered in the course of the Second World War. At least 20 million lost their lives. Countless millions of homes and farms were burned or sacked. A third of the nation's territory, including nearly two thirds of its industrial base, was turned into a wasteland--a loss equivalent to the devastation of this country east of Chicago.

Today, should total war ever break out again--no matter how--our two countries would become the primary targets. It is an ironic but accurate fact that the two strongest powers are the two in the most danger of devastation. All we have built, all we have worked for, would be destroyed in the first 24 hours. And even in the cold war, which brings burdens and dangers to so many nations, including this Nation's closest allies--our two countries bear the heaviest burdens. For we are both devoting massive sums of money to weapons that could be better devoted to combating ignorance, poverty, and disease. We are both caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle in which suspicion on one side breeds suspicion on the other, and new weapons beget counterweapons.

In short, both the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, have a mutually deep interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race. Agreements to this end are in the interests of the Soviet Union as well as ours--and even the most hostile nations can be relied upon to accept and keep those treaty obligations, and only those treaty obligations, which are in their own interest.

So, let us not be blind to our differences--but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.

Third: Let us reexamine our attitude toward the cold war, remembering that we are not engaged in a debate, seeking to pile up debating points. We are not here distributing blame or pointing the finger of judgment. We must deal with the world as it is, and not as it might have been had the history of the last 18 years been different.

We must, therefore, persevere in the search for peace in the hope that constructive changes within the Communist bloc might bring within reach solutions which now seem beyond us. We must conduct our affairs in such a way that it becomes in the Communists' interest to agree on a genuine peace. Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy--or of a collective death-wish for the world.

To secure these ends, America's weapons are nonprovocative, carefully controlled, designed to deter, and capable of selective use. Our military forces are committed to peace and disciplined in self-restraint. Our diplomats are instructed to avoid unnecessary irritants and purely rhetorical hostility.

For we can seek a relaxation of tension without relaxing our guard. And, for our part, we do not need to use threats to prove that we are resolute. We do not need to jam foreign broadcasts out of fear our faith will be eroded. We are unwilling to impose our system on any unwilling people--but we are willing and able to engage in peaceful competition with any people on earth.

Meanwhile, we seek to strengthen the United Nations, to help solve its financial problems, to make it a more effective instrument for peace, to develop it into a genuine world security system--a system capable of resolving disputes on the basis of law, of insuring the security of the large and the small, and of creating conditions under which arms can finally be abolished.

At the same time we seek to keep peace inside the non-Communist world, where many nations, all of them our friends, are divided over issues which weaken Western unity, which invite Communist intervention or which threaten to erupt into war. Our efforts in West New Guinea, in the Congo, in the Middle East, and in the Indian subcontinent, have been persistent and patient despite criticism from both sides. We have also tried to set an example for others--by seeking to adjust small but significant differences with our own closest neighbors in Mexico and in Canada.

Speaking of other nations, I wish to make one point clear. We are bound to many nations by alliances. Those alliances exist because our concern and theirs substantially overlap. Our commitment to defend Western Europe and West Berlin, for example, stands undiminished because of the identity of our vital interests. The United States will make no deal with the Soviet Union at the expense of other nations and other peoples, not merely because they are our partners, but also because their interests and ours converge.

Our interests converge, however, not only in defending the frontiers of freedom, but in pursuing the paths of peace. It is our hope--and the purpose of allied policies--to convince the Soviet Union that she, too, should let each nation choose its own future, so long as that choice does not interfere with the choices of others. The Communist drive to impose their political and economic system on others is the primary cause of world tension today. For there can be no doubt that, if all nations could refrain from interfering in the self-determination of others, the peace would be much more assured.

This will require a new effort to achieve world law--a new context for world discussions. It will require increased understanding between the Soviets and ourselves. And increased understanding will require increased contact and communication. One step in this direction is the proposed arrangement for a direct line between Moscow and Washington, to avoid on each side the dangerous delays, misunderstandings, and misreadings of the other's actions which might occur at a time of crisis.

We have also been talking in Geneva about the other first-step measures of arms control designed to limit the intensity of the arms race and to reduce the risks of accidental war. Our primary long range interest in Geneva, however, is general and complete disarmament--designed to take place by stages, permitting parallel political developments to build the new institutions of peace which would take the place of arms. The pursuit of disarmament has been an effort of this Government since the 1920's. It has been urgently sought by the past three administrations. And however dim the prospects may be today, we intend to continue this effort--to continue it in order that all countries, including our own, can better grasp what the problems and possibilities of disarmament are.

The one major area of these negotiations where the end is in sight, yet where a fresh start is badly needed, is in a treaty to outlaw nuclear tests. The conclusion of such a treaty, so near and yet so far, would check the spiraling arms race in one of its most dangerous areas. It would place the nuclear powers in a position to deal more effectively with one of the greatest hazards which man faces in 1963, the further spread of nuclear arms. It would increase our security--it would decrease the prospects of war. Surely this goal is sufficiently important to require our steady pursuit, yielding neither to the temptation to give up the whole effort nor the temptation to give up our insistence on vital and responsible safeguards.

I am taking this opportunity, therefore, to announce two important decisions in this regard.

First: Chairman Khrushchev, Prime Minister Macmillan, and I have agreed that high-level discussions will shortly begin in Moscow looking toward early agreement on a comprehensive test ban treaty. Our hopes must be tempered with the caution of history--but with our hopes go the hopes of all mankind.

Second: To make clear our good faith and solemn convictions on the matter, I now declare that the United States does not propose to conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere so long as other states do not do so. We will not be the first to resume. Such a declaration is no substitute for a formal binding treaty, but I hope it will help us achieve one. Nor would such a treaty be a substitute for disarmament, but I hope it will help us achieve it.

Finally, my fellow Americans, let us examine our attitude toward peace and freedom here at home. The quality and spirit of our own society must justify and support our efforts abroad. We must show it in the dedication of our own lives--as many of you who are graduating today will have a unique opportunity to do, by serving without pay in the Peace Corps abroad or in the proposed National Service Corps here at home.

But wherever we are, we must all, in our daily lives, live up to the age-old faith that peace and freedom walk together. In too many of our cities today, the peace is not secure because the freedom is incomplete.

It is the responsibility of the executive branch at all levels of government--local, State, and National--to provide and protect that freedom for all of our citizens by all means within their authority. It is the responsibility of the legislative branch at all levels, wherever that authority is not now adequate, to make it adequate. And it is the responsibility of all citizens in all sections of this country to respect the rights of all others and to respect the law of the land.

All this is not unrelated to world peace. "When a man's ways please the Lord," the Scriptures tell us, "he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him." And is not peace, in the last analysis, basically a matter of human rights--the right to live out our lives without fear of devastation--the right to breathe air as nature provided it--the right of future generations to a healthy existence?

While we proceed to safeguard our national interests, let us also safeguard human interests. And the elimination of war and arms is clearly in the interest of both. No treaty, however much it may be to the advantage of all, however tightly it may be worded, can provide absolute security against the risks of deception and evasion. But it can--if it is sufficiently effective in its enforcement and if it is sufficiently in the interests of its signers--offer far more security and far fewer risks than an unabated, uncontrolled, unpredictable arms race.

The United States, as the world knows, will never start a war. We do not want a war. We do not now expect a war. This generation of Americans has already had enough--more than enough--of war and hate and oppression. We shall be prepared if others wish it. We shall be alert to try to stop it. But we shall also do our part to build a world of peace where the weak are safe and the strong are just. We are not helpless

before that task or hopeless of its success. Confident and unafraid, we labor on--not toward a strategy of annihilation but toward a strategy of peace.

Ronald Reagan at University of Notre Dame

May 17, 1981

Father Hesburgh, I thank you very much and for so many things. The distinguished honor that you've conferred upon me here today, I must say, however, compounds a sense of guilt that I have nursed for almost 50 years. I thought the first degree I was given was honorary. But it's wonderful to be here today with Governor Orr, Governor Bowen, Senators Lugar and Quayle, and Representative Hiler, these distinguished honorees, the trustees, administration, faculty, students, and friends of Notre Dame and, most important, the graduating class of 1981.

Nancy and I are greatly honored to share this day with you, and our pleasure has been more than doubled because I am also sharing the platform with a longtime and very dear friend, Pat O'Brien.

Pat and I haven't been able to see much of each other lately, so I haven't had a chance to tell him that there is now another tie that binds us together. Until a few weeks ago I knew very little about my father's ancestry. He had been orphaned at age 6. But now I've learned that his grandfather, my great-grandfather, left Ireland to come to America, leaving his home in Ballyporeen, a village in County Tipperary in Ireland, and I have learned that Ballyporeen is the ancestral home of the O'Briens.

Now, if I don't watch out, this may turn out to be less of a commencement than a warm bath in nostalgic memories. Growing up in Illinois, I was influenced by a sports legend so national in scope, it was almost mystical. It is difficult to explain to anyone who didn't live in those times. The legend was based on a combination of three elements: a game, football; a university, Notre Dame; and a man, Knute Rockne. There has been nothing like it before or since.

My first time to ever see Notre Dame was to come here as a sports announcer, 2 years out of college, to broadcast a football game. You won or I wouldn't have mentioned it.

A number of years later I returned here in the company of Pat O'Brien and a galaxy of Hollywood stars for the world premiere of "Knute Rockne—All American" in which I was privileged to play George Gipp. I've always suspected that there might have been many actors in Hollywood who could have played the part better, but no one could have wanted to play it more than I did. And I was given the part largely because the star of that picture, Pat O'Brien, kindly and generously held out a helping hand to a beginning young actor.

Having come from the world of sports, I'd been trying to write a story about Knute Rockne. I must confess that I had someone in mind to play the Gipper. On one of my sports broadcasts before going to Hollywood, I had told the story of his career and tragic death. I didn't have very many words on paper when I learned that the studio that employed me was already preparing a story treatment for that film. And that brings me to the theme of my remarks.

I'm the fifth President of the United States to address a Notre Dame commencement. The temptation is great to use this forum as an address on a great international or national issue that has nothing to do with this occasion. Indeed, this is somewhat traditional. So, I wasn't surprised when I read in several reputable journals that I was going to deliver an address on foreign policy or on the economy. I'm not going to talk about either.

But, by the same token, I'll try not to belabor you with some of the standard rhetoric that is beloved of graduation speakers. For example, I'm not going to tell you that "You know more today that you've ever known before or that you will ever know again." The other standby is, "When I was 14, I didn't think my

father knew anything. By the time I was 21, I was amazed at how much the old gentleman had learned in 7 years." And then, of course, the traditional and the standby is that "A university like this is a storehouse of knowledge because the freshmen bring so much in and the seniors take so little away."

You members of the graduating class of 18—or 1981—I don't really go back that far—are what behaviorists call achievers. And while you will look back with warm pleasure on your memories of these years that brought you here to where you are today, you are also, I know, looking at the future that seems uncertain to most of you but which, let me assure you, offers great expectations.

Take pride in this day. Thank your parents, as one on your behalf has already done here. Thank those who've been of help to you over the last 4 years. And do a little celebrating; you're entitled. This is your day, and whatever I say should take cognizance of that fact. It is a milestone in life, and it marks a time of change.

Winston Churchill, during the darkest period of the "Battle of Britain" in World War II said: "When great causes are on the move in the world . . . we learn we are spirits, not animals, and that something is going on in space and time, and beyond space and time, which, whether we like it or not, spells duty."

Now, I'm going to mention again that movie that Pat and I and Notre Dame were in, because it says something about America. First, Knute Rockne as a boy came to America with his parents from Norway. And in the few years it took him to grow up to college age, he became so American that here at Notre Dame, he became an All American in a game that is still, to this day, uniquely American.

As a coach, he did more than teach young men how to play a game. He believed truly that the noblest work of man was building the character of man. And maybe that's why he was a living legend. No man connected with football has ever achieved the stature or occupied the singular niche in the Nation that he carved out for himself, not just in a sport, but in our entire social structure.

Now, today I hear very often, "Win one for the Gipper," spoken in a humorous vein. Lately I've been hearing it by Congressmen who are supportive of the programs that I've introduced. But let's look at the significance of that story. Rockne could have used Gipp's dying words to win a game any time. But 8 years went by following the death of George Gipp before Rock revealed those dying words, his deathbed wish.

And then he told the story at halftime to a team that was losing, and one of the only teams he had ever coached that was torn by dissension and jealousy and factionalism. The seniors on that team were about to close out their football careers without learning or experiencing any of the real values that a game has to impart. None of them had known George Gipp. They were children when he played for Notre Dame. It was to this team that Rockne told the story and so inspired them that they rose above their personal animosities. For someone they had never known, they joined together in a common cause and attained the unattainable.

We were told when we were making the picture of one line that was spoken by a player during that game. We were actually afraid to put it in the picture. The man who carried the ball over for the winning touchdown was injured on the play. We were told that as he was lifted on the stretcher and carried off the field he was heard to say, "That's the last one I can get for you, Gipper."

Now, it's only a game. And maybe to hear it now, afterward—and this is what we feared—it might sound maudlin and not the way it was intended. But is there anything wrong with young people having an experience, feeling something so deeply, thinking of someone else to the point that they can give so

completely of themselves? There will come times in the lives of all of us when we'll be faced with causes bigger than ourselves, and they won't be on a playing field.

This Nation was born when a band of men, the Founding Fathers, a group so unique we've never seen their like since, rose to such selfless heights. Lawyers, tradesmen, merchants, farmers—56 men achieved security and standing in life but valued freedom more. They pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. Sixteen of them gave their lives. Most gave their fortunes. All preserved their sacred honor.

They gave us more than a nation. They brought to all mankind for the first time the concept that man was born free, that each of us has inalienable rights, ours by the grace of God, and that government was created by us for our convenience, having only the powers that we choose to give it. This is the heritage that you're about to claim as you come out to join the society made up of those who have preceded you by a few years, or some of us by a great many.

This experiment in man's relation to man is a few years into its third century. Saying that may make it sound quite old. But let's look at it from another viewpoint or perspective. A few years ago, someone figured out that if you could condense the entire history of life on Earth into a motion picture that would run for 24 hours a day, 365 days—maybe on leap years we could have an intermission—this idea that is the United States wouldn't appear on the screen until 31/2 seconds before midnight on December 31st. And in those 3 1/2 seconds not only would a new concept of society come into being, a golden hope for all mankind, but more than half the activity, economic activity in world history, would take place on this continent. Free to express their genius, individual Americans, men and women, in 3 1/2 seconds, would perform such miracles of invention, construction, and production as the world had never seen.

As you join us out there beyond the campus, you know there are great unsolved problems. Federalism, with its built in checks and balances, has been distorted. Central government has usurped powers that properly belong to local and State governments. And in so doing, in many ways that central government has begun to fail to do the things that are truly the responsibility of a central government.

All of this has led to the misuse of power and preemption of the prerogatives of people and their social institutions. You are graduating from a great private, or, if you will, independent university. Not too many years ago, such schools were relatively free from government interference. In recent years, government has spawned regulations covering virtually every facet of our lives. The independent and church-supported colleges and universities have found themselves enmeshed in that network of regulations and the costly blizzard of paperwork that government is demanding. Thirty-four congressional committees and almost 80 subcommittees have jurisdiction over 439 separate laws affecting education at the college level alone. Almost every aspect of campus life is now regulated—hiring, firing, promotions, physical plant, construction, record-keeping, fund-raising and, to some extent, curriculum and educational programs.

I hope when you leave this campus that you will do so with a feeling of obligation to your alma mater. She will need your help and support in the years to come. If ever the great independent colleges and universities like Notre Dame give way to and are replaced by tax-supported institutions, the struggle to preserve academic freedom will have been lost.

We're troubled today by economic stagnation, brought on by inflated currency and prohibitive taxes and burdensome regulations. The cost of stagnation in human terms, mostly among those least equipped to survive it, is cruel and inhuman.

Now, after those remarks, don't decide that you'd better turn your diploma back in so you can stay another year on the campus. I've just given you the bad news. The good news is that something is being done about all this because the people of America have said, "Enough already." You know, we who had preceded you had just gotten so busy that we let things get out of hand. We forgot that we were the keepers of the power, forgot to challenge the notion that the state is the principal vehicle of social change, forgot that millions of social interactions among free individuals and institutions can do more to foster economic and social progress than all the careful schemes of government planners.

Well, at last we're remembering, remembering that government has certain legitimate functions which it can perform very well, that it can be responsive to the people, that it can be humane and compassionate, but that when it undertakes tasks that are not its proper province, it can do none of them as well or as economically as the private sector.

For too long government has been fixing things that aren't broken and inventing miracle cures for unknown diseases.

We need you. We need your youth. We need your strength. We need your idealism to help us make right that which is wrong. Now, I know that this period of your life, you have been and are critically looking at the mores and customs of the past and questioning their value. Every generation does that. May I suggest, don't discard the time-tested values upon which civilization was built simply because they're old. More important, don't let today's doom criers and cynics persuade you that the best is past, that from here on it's all downhill. Each generation sees farther than the generation that preceded it because it stands on the shoulders of that generation. You're going to have opportunities beyond anything that we've ever known.

The people have made it plain already. They want an end to excessive government intervention in their lives and in the economy, an end to the burdensome and unnecessary regulations and a punitive tax policy that does take "from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned." They want a government that cannot only continue to send men across the vast reaches of space and bring them safely home, but that can guarantee that you and I can walk in the park of our neighborhood after dark and get safely home. And finally, they want to know that this Nation has the ability to defend itself against those who would seek to pull it down.

And all of this, we the people can do. Indeed, a start has already been made. There's a task force under the leadership of the Vice President, George Bush, that is to look at those regulations I've spoken of. They have already identified hundreds of them that can be wiped out with no harm to the quality of life. And the cancellation of just those regulations will leave billions and billions of dollars in the hands of the people for productive enterprise and research and development and the creation of jobs.

The years ahead are great ones for this country, for the cause of freedom and the spread of civilization. The West won't contain communism, it will transcend communism. It won't bother to dismiss or denounce it, it will dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written.

William Faulkner, at a Nobel Prize ceremony some time back, said man "would not only [merely] endure: he will prevail" against the modern world because he will return to "the old verities and truths of the heart." And then Faulkner said of man, "He is immortal because he alone among creatures . . . has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

One can't say those words—compassion, sacrifice, and endurance—without thinking of the irony that one who so exemplifies them, Pope John Paul II, a man of peace and goodness, an inspiration to the world,

would be struck by a bullet from a man towards whom he could only feel compassion and love. It was Pope John Paul II who warned in last year's encyclical on mercy and justice against certain economic theories that use the rhetoric of class struggle to justify injustice. He said, "In the name of an alleged justice the neighbor is sometimes destroyed, killed, deprived of liberty or stripped of fundamental human rights."

For the West, for America, the time has come to dare to show to the world that our civilized ideas, our traditions, our values, are not—like the ideology and war machine of totalitarian societies—just a facade of strength. It is time for the world to know our intellectual and spiritual values are rooted in the source of all strength, a belief in a Supreme Being, and a law higher than our own.

When it's written, history of our time won't dwell long on the hardships of the recent past. But history will ask—and our answer determine the fate of freedom for a thousand years—Did a nation born of hope lose hope? Did a people forged by courage find courage wanting? Did a generation steeled by hard war and a harsh peace forsake honor at the moment of great climactic struggle for the human spirit?

If history asks such questions, it also answers them. And the answers are to be found in the heritage left by generations of Americans before us. They stand in silent witness to what the world will soon know and history someday record: that in the [its] third century, the American Nation came of age, affirmed its leadership of free men and women serving selflessly a vision of man with God, government for people, and humanity at peace.

A few years ago, an Australian Prime Minister, John Gorton, said, "I wonder if anybody ever thought what the situation for the comparatively small nations in the world would be if there were not in existence the United States, if there were not this giant country prepared to make so many sacrifices." This is the noble and rich heritage rooted in great civil ideas of the West, and it is yours.

My hope today is that in the years to come—and come it shall—when it's your time to explain to another generation the meaning of the past and thereby hold out to them their promise of the future, that you'll recall the truths and traditions of which we've spoken. It is these truths and traditions that define our civilization and make up our national heritage. And now, they're yours to protect and pass on.

I have one more hope for you: when you do speak to the next generation about these things, that you will always be able to speak of an America that is strong and free, to find in your hearts an unbounded pride in this much-loved country, this once and future land, this bright and hopeful nation whose generous spirit and great ideals the world still honors.

Congratulations, and God bless you.

Barack Obama at Rutgers University

May 15, 2016

Hello Rutgers! (Applause.) R-U rah-rah! (Applause.) Thank you so much. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you, President Barchi, for that introduction. Let me congratulate my extraordinarily worthy fellow honorary Scarlet Knights, Dr. Burnell and Bill Moyers.

Matthew, good job. (Applause.) If you are interested, we can talk after this. (Applause.)

One of the perks of my job is honorary degrees. (Laughter.) But I have to tell you, it impresses nobody in my house. (Laughter.) Now Malia and Sasha just say, “Okay, Dr. Dad, we’ll see you later. Can we have some money?” (Laughter.)

To the Board of Governors; to Chairman Brown; to Lieutenant Governor Guadagno; Mayor Cahill; Mayor Wahler, members of Congress, Rutgers administrators, faculty, staff, friends, and family -- thank you for the honor of joining you for the 250th anniversary of this remarkable institution. (Applause.) But most of all, congratulations to the Class of 2016! (Applause.)

I come here for a simple reason -- to finally settle this pork roll vs. Taylor ham question. (Laughter and applause.) I'm just kidding. (Laughter.) There's not much I'm afraid to take on in my final year of office, but I know better than to get in the middle of that debate. (Laughter.)

The truth is, Rutgers, I came here because you asked. (Applause.) Now, it's true that a lot of schools invite me to their commencement every year. But you are the first to launch a three-year campaign. (Laughter.) Emails, letters, tweets, YouTube videos. I even got three notes from the grandmother of your student body president. (Laughter.) And I have to say that really sealed the deal. That was smart, because I have a soft spot for grandmas. (Laughter.)

So I'm here, off Exit 9, on the banks of the Old Raritan -- (applause) -- at the site of one of the original nine colonial colleges. (Applause.) Winners of the first-ever college football game. (Applause.) One of the newest members of the Big Ten. (Applause.) Home of what I understand to be a Grease Truck for a Fat Sandwich. (Applause.) Mozzarella sticks and chicken fingers on your cheesesteaks -- (applause.) I'm sure Michelle would approve. (Laughter.)

But somehow, you have survived such death-defying acts. (Laughter.) You also survived the daily jockeying for buses, from Livingston to Busch, to Cook, to Douglass, and back again. (Applause.) I suspect that a few of you are trying to survive this afternoon, after a late night at Olde Queens. (Applause.) You know who you are. (Laughter.)

But, however you got here, you made it. You made it. Today, you join a long line of Scarlet Knights whose energy and intellect have lifted this university to heights its founders could not have imagined. Two hundred and fifty years ago, when America was still just an idea, a charter from the Royal Governor -- Ben Franklin's son -- established Queen's College. A few years later, a handful of students gathered in a converted tavern for the first class. And from that first class in a pub, Rutgers has evolved into one of the finest research institutions in America. (Applause.)

This is a place where you 3D-print prosthetic hands for children, and devise rooftop wind arrays that can power entire office buildings with clean, renewable energy. Every day, tens of thousands of students come here, to this intellectual melting pot, where ideas and cultures flow together among what might just be America's most diverse student body. (Applause.) Here in New Brunswick, you can debate philosophy with a classmate from South Asia in one class, and then strike up a conversation on the EE

Bus with a first-generation Latina student from Jersey City, before sitting down for your psych group project with a veteran who's going to school on the Post-9/11 GI Bill. (Applause.)

America converges here. And in so many ways, the history of Rutgers mirrors the evolution of America - the course by which we became bigger, stronger, and richer and more dynamic, and a more inclusive nation.

But America's progress has never been smooth or steady. Progress doesn't travel in a straight line. It zigs and zags in fits and starts. Progress in America has been hard and contentious, and sometimes bloody. It remains uneven and at times, for every two steps forward, it feels like we take one step back.

Now, for some of you, this may sound like your college career. (Laughter.) It sounds like mine, anyway. (Laughter.) Which makes sense, because measured against the whole of human history, America remains a very young nation -- younger, even, than this university.

But progress is bumpy. It always has been. But because of dreamers and innovators and strivers and activists, progress has been this nation's hallmark. I'm fond of quoting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." (Applause.) It bends towards justice. I believe that. But I also believe that the arc of our nation, the arc of the world does not bend towards justice, or freedom, or equality, or prosperity on its own. It depends on us, on the choices we make, particularly at certain inflection points in history; particularly when big changes are happening and everything seems up for grabs.

And, Class of 2016, you are graduating at such an inflection point. Since the start of this new millennium, you've already witnessed horrific terrorist attacks, and war, and a Great Recession. You've seen economic and technological and cultural shifts that are profoundly altering how we work and how we communicate, how we live, how we form families. The pace of change is not subsiding; it is accelerating. And these changes offer not only great opportunity, but also great peril.

Fortunately, your generation has everything it takes to lead this country toward a brighter future. I'm confident that you can make the right choices -- away from fear and division and paralysis, and toward cooperation and innovation and hope. (Applause.) Now, partly, I'm confident because, on average, you're smarter and better educated than my generation -- although we probably had better penmanship -- (laughter) -- and were certainly better spellers. We did not have spell-check back in my day. You're not only better educated, you've been more exposed to the world, more exposed to other cultures. You're more diverse. You're more environmentally conscious. You have a healthy skepticism for conventional wisdom.

So you've got the tools to lead us. And precisely because I have so much confidence in you, I'm not going to spend the remainder of my time telling you exactly how you're going to make the world better. You'll figure it out. You'll look at things with fresher eyes, unencumbered by the biases and blind spots and inertia and general crankiness of your parents and grandparents and old heads like me. But I do have a couple of suggestions that you may find useful as you go out there and conquer the world.

Point number one: When you hear someone longing for the "good old days," take it with a grain of salt. (Laughter and applause.) Take it with a grain of salt. We live in a great nation and we are rightly proud of our history. We are beneficiaries of the labor and the grit and the courage of generations who came before. But I guess it's part of human nature, especially in times of change and uncertainty, to want to look backwards and long for some imaginary past when everything worked, and the economy hummed,

and all politicians were wise, and every kid was well-mannered, and America pretty much did whatever it wanted around the world.

Guess what. It ain't so. (Laughter.) The "good old days" weren't that great. Yes, there have been some stretches in our history where the economy grew much faster, or when government ran more smoothly. There were moments when, immediately after World War II, for example, or the end of the Cold War, when the world bent more easily to our will. But those are sporadic, those moments, those episodes. In fact, by almost every measure, America is better, and the world is better, than it was 50 years ago, or 30 years ago, or even eight years ago. (Applause.)

And by the way, I'm not -- set aside 150 years ago, pre-Civil War -- there's a whole bunch of stuff there we could talk about. Set aside life in the '50s, when women and people of color were systematically excluded from big chunks of American life. Since I graduated, in 1983 -- which isn't that long ago -- (laughter) -- I'm just saying. Since I graduated, crime rates, teenage pregnancy, the share of Americans living in poverty -- they're all down. The share of Americans with college educations have gone way up. Our life expectancy has, as well. Blacks and Latinos have risen up the ranks in business and politics. (Applause.) More women are in the workforce. (Applause.) They're earning more money -- although it's long past time that we passed laws to make sure that women are getting the same pay for the same work as men. (Applause.)

Meanwhile, in the eight years since most of you started high school, we're also better off. You and your fellow graduates are entering the job market with better prospects than any time since 2007. Twenty million more Americans know the financial security of health insurance. We're less dependent on foreign oil. We've doubled the production of clean energy. We have cut the high school dropout rate. We've cut the deficit by two-thirds. Marriage equality is the law of the land. (Applause.)

And just as America is better, the world is better than when I graduated. Since I graduated, an Iron Curtain fell, apartheid ended. There's more democracy. We virtually eliminated certain diseases like polio. We've cut extreme poverty drastically. We've cut infant mortality by an enormous amount. (Applause.)

Now, I say all these things not to make you complacent. We've got a bunch of big problems to solve. But I say it to point out that change has been a constant in our history. And the reason America is better is because we didn't look backwards we didn't fear the future. We seized the future and made it our own. And that's exactly why it's always been young people like you that have brought about big change -- because you don't fear the future.

That leads me to my second point: The world is more interconnected than ever before, and it's becoming more connected every day. Building walls won't change that. (Applause.)

Look, as President, my first responsibility is always the security and prosperity of the United States. And as citizens, we all rightly put our country first. But if the past two decades have taught us anything, it's that the biggest challenges we face cannot be solved in isolation. (Applause.) When overseas states start falling apart, they become breeding grounds for terrorists and ideologies of nihilism and despair that ultimately can reach our shores. When developing countries don't have functioning health systems, epidemics like Zika or Ebola can spread and threaten Americans, too. And a wall won't stop that. (Applause.)

If we want to close loopholes that allow large corporations and wealthy individuals to avoid paying their fair share of taxes, we've got to have the cooperation of other countries in a global financial system to

help enforce financial laws. The point is, to help ourselves we've got to help others -- (applause) -- not pull up the drawbridge and try to keep the world out. (Applause.)

And engagement does not just mean deploying our military. There are times where we must take military action to protect ourselves and our allies, and we are in awe of and we are grateful for the men and women who make up the finest fighting force the world has ever known. (Applause.) But I worry if we think that the entire burden of our engagement with the world is up to the 1 percent who serve in our military, and the rest of us can just sit back and do nothing. They can't shoulder the entire burden. And engagement means using all the levers of our national power, and rallying the world to take on our shared challenges.

You look at something like trade, for example. We live in an age of global supply chains, and cargo ships that crisscross oceans, and online commerce that can render borders obsolete. And a lot of folks have legitimate concerns with the way globalization has progressed -- that's one of the changes that's been taking place -- jobs shipped overseas, trade deals that sometimes put workers and businesses at a disadvantage. But the answer isn't to stop trading with other countries. In this global economy, that's not even possible. The answer is to do trade the right way, by negotiating with other countries so that they raise their labor standards and their environmental standards; and we make sure they don't impose unfair tariffs on American goods or steal American intellectual property. That's how we make sure that international rules are consistent with our values -- including human rights. And ultimately, that's how we help raise wages here in America. That's how we help our workers compete on a level playing field.

Building walls won't do that. (Applause.) It won't boost our economy, and it won't enhance our security either. Isolating or disparaging Muslims, suggesting that they should be treated differently when it comes to entering this country -- (applause) -- that is not just a betrayal of our values -- (applause) -- that's not just a betrayal of who we are, it would alienate the very communities at home and abroad who are our most important partners in the fight against violent extremism. Suggesting that we can build an endless wall along our borders, and blame our challenges on immigrants -- that doesn't just run counter to our history as the world's melting pot; it contradicts the evidence that our growth and our innovation and our dynamism has always been spurred by our ability to attract strivers from every corner of the globe. That's how we became America. Why would we want to stop it now? (Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Four more years!

THE PRESIDENT: Can't do it. (Laughter.)

Which brings me to my third point: Facts, evidence, reason, logic, an understanding of science -- these are good things. (Applause.) These are qualities you want in people making policy. These are qualities you want to cultivate in yourselves as citizens. (Applause.) That might seem obvious. (Laughter.) That's why we honor Bill Moyers or Dr. Burnell.

We traditionally have valued those things. But if you were listening to today's political debate, you might wonder where this strain of anti-intellectualism came from. (Applause.) So, Class of 2016, let me be as clear as I can be. In politics and in life, ignorance is not a virtue. (Applause.) It's not cool to not know what you're talking about. (Applause.) That's not keeping it real, or telling it like it is. (Laughter.) That's not challenging political correctness. That's just not knowing what you're talking about. (Applause.) And yet, we've become confused about this.

Look, our nation's Founders -- Franklin, Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson -- they were born of the Enlightenment. They sought to escape superstition, and sectarianism, and tribalism, and no-

nothingness. (Applause.) They believed in rational thought and experimentation, and the capacity of informed citizens to master our own fates. That is embedded in our constitutional design. That spirit informed our inventors and our explorers, the Edisons and the Wright Brothers, and the George Washington Carvers and the Grace Hoppers, and the Norman Borlaugs and the Steve Jobses. That's what built this country.

And today, in every phone in one of your pockets -- (laughter) -- we have access to more information than at any time in human history, at a touch of a button. But, ironically, the flood of information hasn't made us more discerning of the truth. In some ways, it's just made us more confident in our ignorance. (Applause.) We assume whatever is on the web must be true. We search for sites that just reinforce our own predispositions. Opinions masquerade as facts. The wildest conspiracy theories are taken for gospel.

Now, understand, I am sure you've learned during your years of college -- and if not, you will learn soon -- that there are a whole lot of folks who are book smart and have no common sense. (Applause.) That's the truth. You'll meet them if you haven't already. (Laughter.) So the fact that they've got a fancy degree -- you got to talk to them to see whether they know what they're talking about. (Laughter.) Qualities like kindness and compassion, honesty, hard work -- they often matter more than technical skills or know-how. (Applause.)

But when our leaders express a disdain for facts, when they're not held accountable for repeating falsehoods and just making stuff up, while actual experts are dismissed as elitists, then we've got a problem. (Applause.)

You know, it's interesting that if we get sick, we actually want to make sure the doctors have gone to medical school, they know what they're talking about. (Applause.) If we get on a plane, we say we really want a pilot to be able to pilot the plane. (Laughter.) And yet, in our public lives, we certainly think, "I don't want somebody who's done it before." (Laughter and applause.) The rejection of facts, the rejection of reason and science -- that is the path to decline. It calls to mind the words of Carl Sagan, who graduated high school here in New Jersey -- (applause) -- he said: "We can judge our progress by the courage of our questions and the depths of our answers, our willingness to embrace what is true rather than what feels good."

The debate around climate change is a perfect example of this. Now, I recognize it doesn't feel like the planet is warmer right now. (Laughter.) I understand. There was hail when I landed in Newark. (Laughter.) (The wind starts blowing hard.) (Laughter.) But think about the climate change issue. Every day, there are officials in high office with responsibilities who mock the overwhelming consensus of the world's scientists that human activities and the release of carbon dioxide and methane and other substances are altering our climate in profound and dangerous ways.

A while back, you may have seen a United States senator trotted out a snowball during a floor speech in the middle of winter as "proof" that the world was not warming. (Laughter.) I mean, listen, climate change is not something subject to political spin. There is evidence. There are facts. We can see it happening right now. (Applause.) If we don't act, if we don't follow through on the progress we made in Paris, the progress we've been making here at home, your generation will feel the brunt of this catastrophe.

So it's up to you to insist upon and shape an informed debate. Imagine if Benjamin Franklin had seen that senator with the snowball, what he would think. Imagine if your 5th grade science teacher had seen that. (Laughter.) He'd get a D. (Laughter.) And he's a senator! (Laughter.)

Look, I'm not suggesting that cold analysis and hard data are ultimately more important in life than passion, or faith, or love, or loyalty. I am suggesting that those highest expressions of our humanity can only flourish when our economy functions well, and proposed budgets add up, and our environment is protected. And to accomplish those things, to make collective decisions on behalf of a common good, we have to use our heads. We have to agree that facts and evidence matter. And we got to hold our leaders and ourselves accountable to know what the heck they're talking about. (Applause.)

All right. I only have two more points. I know it's getting cold and you guys have to graduate. (Laughter.) Point four: Have faith in democracy. Look, I know it's not always pretty. Really, I know. (Laughter.) I've been living it. But it's how, bit by bit, generation by generation, we have made progress in this nation. That's how we banned child labor. That's how we cleaned up our air and our water. That's how we passed programs like Social Security and Medicare that lifted millions of seniors out of poverty. (Applause.)

None of these changes happened overnight. They didn't happen because some charismatic leader got everybody suddenly to agree on everything. It didn't happen because some massive political revolution occurred. It actually happened over the course of years of advocacy, and organizing, and alliance-building, and deal-making, and the changing of public opinion. It happened because ordinary Americans who cared participated in the political process.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Because of you! (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that's nice. I mean, I helped, but -- (applause.)

Look, if you want to change this country for the better, you better start participating. I'll give you an example on a lot of people's minds right now -- and that's the growing inequality in our economy. Over much of the last century, we've unleashed the strongest economic engine the world has ever seen, but over the past few decades, our economy has become more and more unequal. The top 10 percent of earners now take in half of all income in the U.S. In the past, it used to be a top CEO made 20 or 30 times the income of the average worker. Today, it's 300 times more. And wages aren't rising fast enough for millions of hardworking families.

Now, if we want to reverse those trends, there are a bunch of policies that would make a real difference. We can raise the minimum wage. (Applause.) We can modernize our infrastructure. We can invest in early childhood education. We can make college more affordable. (Applause.) We can close tax loopholes on hedge fund managers and take that money and give tax breaks to help families with child care or retirement. And if we did these things, then we'd help to restore the sense that hard work is rewarded and we could build an economy that truly works for everybody. (Applause.)

Now, the reason some of these things have not happened, even though the majority of people approve of them, is really simple. It's not because I wasn't proposing them. It wasn't because the facts and the evidence showed they wouldn't work. It was because a huge chunk of Americans, especially young people, do not vote.

In 2014, voter turnout was the lowest since World War II. Fewer than one in five young people showed up to vote -- 2014. And the four who stayed home determined the course of this country just as much as the single one who voted. Because apathy has consequences. It determines who our Congress is. It determines what policies they prioritize. It even, for example, determines whether a really highly qualified Supreme Court nominee receives the courtesy of a hearing and a vote in the United States Senate. (Applause.)

And, yes, big money in politics is a huge problem. We've got to reduce its influence. Yes, special interests and lobbyists have disproportionate access to the corridors of power. But, contrary to what we hear sometimes from both the left as well as the right, the system isn't as rigged as you think, and it certainly is not as hopeless as you think. Politicians care about being elected, and they especially care about being reelected. And if you vote and you elect a majority that represents your views, you will get what you want. And if you opt out, or stop paying attention, you won't. It's that simple. (Applause.) It's not that complicated.

Now, one of the reasons that people don't vote is because they don't see the changes they were looking for right away. Well, guess what -- none of the great strides in our history happened right away. It took Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP decades to win *Brown v. Board of Education*; and then another decade after that to secure the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. (Applause.) And it took more time after that for it to start working. It took a proud daughter of New Jersey, Alice Paul, years of organizing marches and hunger strikes and protests, and drafting hundreds of pieces of legislation, and writing letters and giving speeches, and working with congressional leaders before she and other suffragettes finally helped win women the right to vote. (Applause.)

Each stage along the way required compromise. Sometimes you took half a loaf. You forged allies. Sometimes you lost on an issue, and then you came back to fight another day. That's how democracy works. So you've got to be committed to participating not just if you get immediate gratification, but you got to be a citizen full-time, all the time.

And if participation means voting, and it means compromise, and organizing and advocacy, it also means listening to those who don't agree with you. I know a couple years ago, folks on this campus got upset that Condoleezza Rice was supposed to speak at a commencement. Now, I don't think it's a secret that I disagree with many of the foreign policies of Dr. Rice and the previous administration. But the notion that this community or the country would be better served by not hearing from a former Secretary of State, or shutting out what she had to say -- I believe that's misguided. (Applause.) I don't think that's how democracy works best, when we're not even willing to listen to each other. (Applause.) I believe that's misguided.

If you disagree with somebody, bring them in -- (applause) -- and ask them tough questions. Hold their feet to the fire. Make them defend their positions. (Applause.) If somebody has got a bad or offensive idea, prove it wrong. Engage it. Debate it. Stand up for what you believe in. (Applause.) Don't be scared to take somebody on. Don't feel like you got to shut your ears off because you're too fragile and somebody might offend your sensibilities. Go at them if they're not making any sense. Use your logic and reason and words. And by doing so, you'll strengthen your own position, and you'll hone your arguments. And maybe you'll learn something and realize you don't know everything. And you may have a new understanding not only about what your opponents believe but maybe what you believe. Either way, you win. And more importantly, our democracy wins. (Applause.)

So, anyway, all right. That's it, Class of 2016 -- (laughter) -- a few suggestions on how you can change the world. Except maybe I've got one last suggestion. (Applause.) Just one. And that is, gear yourself for the long haul. Whatever path you choose -- business, nonprofits, government, education, health care, the arts -- whatever it is, you're going to have some setbacks. You will deal occasionally with foolish people. You will be frustrated. You'll have a boss that's not great. You won't always get everything you want -- at least not as fast as you want it. So you have to stick with it. You have to be persistent. And success, however small, however incomplete, success is still success. I always tell my daughters, you

know, better is good. It may not be perfect, it may not be great, but it's good. That's how progress happens -- in societies and in our own lives.

So don't lose hope if sometimes you hit a roadblock. Don't lose hope in the face of naysayers. And certainly don't let resistance make you cynical. Cynicism is so easy, and cynics don't accomplish much. As a friend of mine who happens to be from New Jersey, a guy named Bruce Springsteen, once sang -- (applause) -- "they spend their lives waiting for a moment that just don't come." Don't let that be you. Don't waste your time waiting.

If you doubt you can make a difference, look at the impact some of your fellow graduates are already making. Look at what Matthew is doing. Look at somebody like Yasmin Ramadan, who began organizing anti-bullying assemblies when she was 10 years old to help kids handle bias and discrimination, and here at Rutgers, helped found the Muslim Public Relations Council to work with administrators and police to promote inclusion. (Applause.)

Look at somebody like Madison Little, who grew up dealing with some health issues, and started wondering what his care would have been like if he lived someplace else, and so, here at Rutgers, he took charge of a student nonprofit and worked with folks in Australia and Cambodia and Uganda to address the AIDS epidemic. "Our generation has so much energy to adapt and impact the world," he said. "My peers give me a lot of hope that we'll overcome the obstacles we face in society."

That's you! Is it any wonder that I am optimistic? Throughout our history, a new generation of Americans has reached up and bent the arc of history in the direction of more freedom, and more opportunity, and more justice. And, Class of 2016, it is your turn now -- (applause) -- to shape our nation's destiny, as well as your own.

So get to work. Make sure the next 250 years are better than the last. (Applause.)

Good luck. God bless you. God bless this country we love. Thank you. (Applause.)