

Commencement Address

Summer Quarter

September 2, 1988

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A few days ago I was out doing my early morning 2-mile jaunt around Worthing Hills, and I felt so exhilarated, so exuberant with the crispness of that early morning air. I began to ask myself the question, "How could it be that I could feel so vibrant, so alive so early in the morning?" And it seemed like out of the blue came the statement, "Hale, you're on borrowed time," considering the fact that the last few years I've had a ruptured esophagus and six-way bypass surgery.

I just want to announce to the graduates this morning that, given where you are at this moment of history, you too are on borrowed time because from the day you were born every tick of the clock, every second and every minute and every hour was taken away from that allotted time you have in the first place. You are on borrowed time.

Mr. President, eminent platform guests, faculty colleagues, Office of Minority Affairs staff, my lovely family, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished graduates of these summer exercises of 1988, I recall a few years ago in Thornton Wilder's play, "Our Town," a postmaster went into a young city, as it were, and began to call the address out on the envelope that he had for the

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person who was going to be the recipient, "John Doe, Grovers Village, New Hampshire, United States of America, continent of North America, western hemisphere, the earth, the solar system, the universe, the mind of God." A little kid down the street looking out the window, leaned out and said, "Wow, what do you know?"

I can imagine you sitting there this morning, after so many years, some of you saying to yourselves, "I can't believe it. What do you know?" I can imagine some of your parents out there, sensing the transition between adolescent and adult roles, saying, "What do you know?" And I know that some of the professors, knowing the extent to which you've scrambled attempting to meet those intimidating agenda of curriculum and examinations, saying, "Well, what do you know?"

And the question today is really, "What do you know?"

You are, we have in seeing you, you've dug out--have been dug out of the obscurity, if you please, of your individual states and countries--some of you from America, some of you from outside of America, from your individual high schools, some large, some small, some rural, some urban, some prestigious, some not so prestigious. And here you are a flower garden, as it were, of diversity, black, brown red, yellow and white. You really need, while thinking of what you have done and what this university has done for you in molding out some degree of proficiency in your particular fields, and the support certainly that you have gotten from your parents, you should give all those institutions, including yourself, a hand.

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It was 33 years ago in June of 1955 just across the road when I had the opportunity to come to the platform and standing in the Ph.D. line to have that hood draped over me, that flashing scarlet and gray. My son, then two and one half years of age, was sitting in the auditorium and on his mother's lap. And when the graduate representative threw that hood over me he said, being the television addict that he was at that time, "Daddy's Superman."

Well, for that one moment, in his mind daddy was superman.

And as you sit here today there are those who consider you superwomen and supermen. Especially when you return to your home communities. Super because of the fact, really in fact, there are tens of thousands of young people who never went to college in the first place. Over half of those who enter never complete two years of education. And then there are only a third of the half of those who ever finish the four year requirements, to say nothing of post graduate work. And so you are a super crowd, if you please, and because of that, there will be many demands, many expectations, people saying you ought to do this, you ought to do that, this is what you ought to do in terms of post graduate work, you ought to take this job, you ought to get married, you ought to get married to whom. But now is take charge time. Your take charge time. And when I think of that, I think of the time when I stood in the moot court chambers of a very prestigious law school in this country and I saw a triad on the facade of that court chamber saying, "Know yourself--Socrates. Control yourself--Cicero. Give yourself--Jesus."

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It was a few weeks ago that I sat at the finish line of the 400 meters pre-Olympic trial run in Indianapolis. And I saw six of the fastest 400 meter runners in the world sprint around that track. And by the time they got to the final 100 meters I saw four ebony encased sprinters, heel on heel, right at each other's feet, moving toward the tape. Moving with unadored speed and spontaniety. And the one who was in fourth place moved by the one who was in third place, and by the one who was in second place, and hit the tape just one stride ahead of the one who was in first place. Butch Reynolds knew himself. 43.93 and of course you know he's broken the world's record since that time. And you don't ad hoc world records. Butch Reynolds raced against time. He raced against odd times. He raced against relay teams. He raced against stop watches. He raced against wind. He raced against stiff winds, in order to become what he became and has become.

Maslow has taught us a lot about the humanistic approach to psychology. We know that the people who really know themselves are the people who are comfortable with themselves, who are not afraid of themselves, who do not put themselves down when they make mistakes. But who feel themselves to be adequate and competent, who have a sense of being and leadership. People who are self-actualizing persons are people who are straight forward and articulate, spontaneously simple and direct in terms of what they have to say. People who are self-actualizing persons are persons who know the value of hard work. They don't wait for

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things to happen. They make things happen. People who are self-actualizing people have a degree, a psychological freedom. They are able to stand on their own two feet and they care less about the status quo and what others say. They say! What do they say? They say, " Let them say."

And so you have to know yourself. You have to know the importance--and you have already learned that--the importance of trial through adversity. I was reading a book some time ago, a book by Tim Hansel, who was talking about the distinction between happiness and joy. He said happiness is a circumstance. We're happy because we're here today, we're happy because someone put some money in our pocket or some clothes on our back. But happiness is a circumstance that is determined by external factors. Joy is inward. Joy is an attitude. Jesse's right. Your attitude does determine your altitude.

But over and beyond that, you have discovered, as Goertzel in their studies some years ago, when studying 413 different people in subjects who were outstanding leaders, they came to some startling conclusions. They discovered that these 413 people, by and large, did not necessarily come from happy homes. Most of them came from homes which were experiencing trauma, where parents were separated, where there was all kind of tension. But somehow within themselves they had made a determination that they were going to make it. They knew that they had to be the captains of their soul.

Langston Hughes, the black poet, during the Harlem

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renaissance period, speaking through a mother to her child's, wrote the poem entitled, "Life Ain't No Crystal Staircase."

"Life Ain't No Crystal Stairwell." Letting her young black boy knowing during those years that somehow he had to strive and stretch beyond the odds. Helen Keller knew this. Deaf and dumb at age two, she knew that life wasn't any crystal stair.

Solenytzen knew it, working for eleven years in a labor camp and interviewing 200 prisoners. Martin Luther King knew it, that life was no crystal stair, writing a letter from a Birmingham jail. Mahatma Ghandi knew that life was no crystal stair, daring to fast and to emaciate himself as it were because he fought for the independence of his people. Caesar Chavez knew it over the past two months, starving himself for 36 days because he had a cause. And needed to champion that cause.

But it not enough to know yourself. Somewhere along the line you have to learn how to control yourself. And control goes beyond something that is personal. It deals with the outside world.

There are three ways to approach any problem. We can approach it through escape by avoiding it. We can approach by embracing it and saying, "I can do nothing about it." Or we can approach a problem through encounter, by saying, "I will deal with it."

And somewhere along the line you have learned the importance of that. Every student coming out of high school ought to plan to spend eight years in terms of pursuing an education. Until

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one is aged 25. From 17 to 25. Four years in college, four years of graduate or professional study in law school or medical school or whatever discipline one might need to develop himself or herself. One retires at 65 they say. So sweat for eight, cool it for 40. A very simple formula. But it involves control.

When I was a student at the University of Nebraska I wanted a way to get home so I worked for the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad station and I cleaned our 40 brass cuspidors and spittoons and polished them every night for 40¢ an hour so I could get a free railroad pass to get home during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays because I knew that someday if I was ever to finish that undergraduate and graduate program at that university, that someday I would have the choice of travel conveyances and could travel first class by air, by plane or by ship.

Control is a very important variable in our fabric of success. Somewhere along the way the time has come for your generation to decide that it's going to develop a resistance against those social and political patterns that would overwhelm us. We read, especially across the headlines, every day, every day, of the public ambiguities with respect to morality. Where do you stand on the issues? Do you know that there are more hungry people today in the world than there were 30 years ago? Do you know that the biosphere is more contaminated today than 15 years ago? Are you aware of the fact, the extent to which in many, many instances, we rape third world countries in order to

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suit our own ravenous taste for minerals and resources. Are you aware of the extent to which sometimes we engage in the preparation of perilous armaments to support purposeless wars while we sit on the side.

It's more to education than learning and knowing. Somewhere our values ought to be beyond the values of achieving money and status and prestige. We do have responsibilities. And it is an opportunity for you. Beyond controlling yourself, you have a responsibility for giving yourself.

In 1984, six months before Jesse Jackson ran for the presidency of the United States, he called about 25 of us in as part of a think tank operation and there were many of us there who were very much concerned about his life, his safety, his family. And after all of us had talked for about an hour and a half just in that area of discussion, he calmly stood up and said, "I've thought about this. I've talked it over with my family. I've talked it over with my God." And he said, "I'm very comfortable. Someone has to do this to let little boys and girls, black, brown, red and yellow, know that America is America and America can accomplish its goal and its dream." He said, "The greatest lack in this world is not the lack of knowledge but the lack of courage."

And so the challenge this morning is to take courage, to take hold of courage, and to learn to give. "The world is too much with us, late and soon, getting and spending we lay waste our powers." The poet says, "Little we see in nature that is ours." Eric Fromm challenges, "not so much to have but to be."

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And so, to the university administrators and the Board of Trustees, I would say to them that this university is a great university; it has a great history and can have a greater future. But let us never forget that this university was founded because of the Morrill Act in 1862, making it a public land grant university when many of our citizens did not have the right of the resources to go to those very prestigious Ivy League schools because you had to have money, big money in order to get in. So the public land grant institutions were provided for the people.

And while we continue to promote affirmative action we still want to raise the quality and the level and the standards of this institution. This we must do, but not at the expense of the people or minorities or women or those who have been historically disenfranchised. We must be selective but not so selective. We've got to know the difference between nothing is worse than a revolving door but

Thank you.

To my faculty colleagues, I would say keep on teaching. Remember that every student who comes is yearning and is hungry and many times misinformed but they need our love. We need to take off our honorific badges and teach. William Arrowsmith reminds us that it is possible for a young person to go all the way from kindergarten through graduate school and never be confronted with a teacher. Teaching is a touch of immortality.

And finally to my young friends, this distinguished class,

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me remind you of the words of Solomon, "In all your getting, get understanding." "In all of your getting, get understanding." James Weldon Johnson said, "God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou who has brought us thus far on thy way, Thou who has by thy might led us into the light, Keep us forever in the path, we pray. Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee, Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee. Shall we beneath thy hand may we forever stand True to our God and true to our native land."

We can cheer and we will cheer the first day of the football season, 90,000 strong. If we want to continue to be strong we should make no apologies and no excuses for recognizing that there is something superior to ourselves.

Let me say that if we want to keep on giving, if we want to know ourselves, if we want to control ourselves, if we want to give ourselves, take the words of Gibran to heart. "There are those who give little of the much that they have and they give it for recognition and their hidden desires makes their gifts unwholesome. There are those who have little and give it all. These are the believers in life and in the bounties of life their coffers are never empty. There are those give with joy and that joy is their reward. There are those who give in pain and that pain is their baptism. There are those who give and know not pain in giving, nor do they see joy, nor the mindfulness of virtue. They give as the myrtle gives in yonder valley who breathes her fragrance into space. Through the hands of such as

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these God speaks. And from behind their eyes, he smiles upon the earth. It is good to give when asked; it is better to give unasked." You are the only generation that has the power of veto on the survival of the next generation. And I hope you take that seriously.

So therefore, keep on stepping. Step on into life giving it vibrancy and exuberance. Step on up into life using the potential you have to go as far as you can. Step on over life recognizing that there are no red lights that can stop you if you really want to make it. And step out of life recognizing that you ought to be your own person. In the words of the motto at the University of Aberdeen, "They say. What do they say? Let them say."

This is your hour and you are on borrowed time.

Thank you very much.