

COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

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Mr. President, members of the Board of Trustees, my colleagues in the faculty, friends and families, and--most of all--honored graduates:

It is a wonderful thrill for me to be with you here today. I remember so clearly a Friday morning eighteen years and three months ago when I stood just where you are standing now, about to receive my Ph.D. from The Ohio State University. I was wonderfully excited and happy. And PROUD. I honestly believe that it was the proudest moment of my life. Up until this moment right now. Because I can hardly imagine a greater honor than to be able to lead the rejoicing at my own Alma Mater as it celebrates the central, most meaningful ceremony in academic life, graduation. And at another level I'm emotionally exactly appropriate for this job I've taken on. Because I'm both a teacher and a mother--can you imagine anyone better suited to dish out ten minutes of advice to 1500 people who have to sit still and listen?

What we are about to do here today is very important. Afterwards everything will be different. You'll be a college graduate. Some of you will even be called "doctor!" "Doctor". . . just roll it over on your tongue. You'll be leaving your campus housing, possibly moving clear out of Columbus. You'll be taking on new tasks--starting a new job, or going on to graduate or professional school. You'll be leaving dear, dear friends. And you'll be making new friends. (Actually, there's sort of good news on that front: in one fell swoop you'll make a whole set of new friends, in the alumni association and Dan Heinlen. Dan will reach out to you with the right hand of friendship. Of course his left hand will be reaching for

your wallet, but you should welcome him warmly: like your parents and your professors before him, he only wants what's best for you!)

What we're actually experiencing together today is a "liminal" moment. A "limen" is a threshold or a beach, the boundary where a transformation happens, where something turns into something else. And such liminal moments--some other examples of the big ones are birth or death or marriage--are inherently sacred. So I want to talk to you seriously today for just a few minutes about some important concepts. And because I am a historian of the Victorian period, even though this is a day when we are looking toward the future, you might be prepared for me to use some old-fashioned words and to get some ideas from the past.

Basically what I--and I suspect you yourselves--have a lot of today is HOPE. Let's spell out some of the things it makes sense to hope for:

I hope for all of you--and I'm sure your families hope for all of you--this first one: good and noble work. Certainly it would be good if it's, as we say, "in your field." And it would be good if it comes along quickly. Of course it's wonderful if your job makes you and your family proud. But mainly what you need is something that makes you tired by the end of each day, so that you go to bed feeling that you have done an honest day's work advancing some cause to which you are committed.

Of course, this good and noble work should also pay the bills, and I hope that you'll make as much money as you need. But I suggest that you try to remain clear about what you mean by the word "need." Different folks have different definitions of "the good things in life"--for most the list would include adequate food and housing and medical care and the ability to educate their children; I personally would add the ability to buy an unreasonable number of books and to travel, mainly to England, and you probably have your own personal favorites.

What I hope you won't spend too much energy on is trying to have things mainly so you can show other people that you can afford to have things that they can't afford to have. As Wordsworth put it, "The world is too much with us, late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." You are remarkable people, possessed of many powers. I'd hope you'd conserve at least some of them--both your getting and your spending powers--for activities which will make you and your world better. That's called "stewardship," one of my favorite old-fashioned words.

I also hope for your commitment to the public good. I love the word "public," as in "Ohio State is a public university." Social commentators, including Cornel West, the director of the African American Studies program at Princeton, have been talking and writing lately about the breakdown in our "public" conversation and the need to reestablish a sense of our public connectedness. West argues that, faced with the truly overwhelming problems confronting our society, many of us have turned inward, toward private lives and private solutions--we flee the troubled cities to the privacy of our suburban, sometimes even walled neighborhoods; we respond to danger in the public sector by becoming privately armed; and we identify ourselves increasingly with narrower and narrower slices of the ethnic pie--a process which does help us develop pride and understanding of our own group but unfortunately too often at the expense of a feeling of pride in and commitment to the larger society. The dictionary says public means "of or pertaining to the people as a whole, belonging to or affecting the concerns of the community, the nation." When we read that the people who founded our nation talked about a shining city on a hill, we would say now that there was much ambiguity, even hypocrisy in their ideal. But there's no question that Jefferson and his colleagues hoped that we would at least TRY to come together in community, that we would argue things out, that we would stay out in public while we learned how to live with one another. We must redevelop the habit of talking in the public square, of engaging one another. This seems to me to be the only way we can become a people once again--not at all by blurring out the differences or

pretending to a false harmony--rather by rejoicing in our glorious diversity, and hanging in with one another while we wrestle things out because we realise that we're all we've got.

What this means with respect to you specifically, is that I hope that you will be political. By this I don't mean that you have to identify with a particular political party--although I DO have a party that I'm sort of partial to, if you'd like to talk with me later. What I want to assert is that we cannot afford for you not to engage in the public conversation and ultimately in the political process. We need you to help us get things we need: adequate educational systems. And effective superhighways, including electronic. And healthcare and daycare. And you need to help us conquer pollution. And international terrorism. And racism at home. And AIDS. And drug trafficking. Obviously no one of you--of us--can solve all of these problems. And maybe even together we can't. But we HAVE TO TRY!! We have to try because the problems will sink us all if we don't--and not just those of us here in Columbus or the United States but all of us on this extremely interconnected planet which many observers are now referring to as a global village.

The third thing I hope for you is relationship. Families come in all shapes and sizes, and I'm not prescribing any particular type. But do I hope that you have the opportunity to love lots of people. I would especially commend three groups to you: older people, younger people, and people roughly your own age. An old fashioned phrase I like a lot is "filial piety"--meaning the appropriate reverence which a child should have for his or her parent. You may very well have noticed during the past few years you've spent here at Ohio State that your own particular parents have been getting quite a bit smarter. What I would wish is that we all, as a society with you in the lead, would open our hearts and minds to the notion that all of our elders carry a great deal of wisdom, that a lot can be learned from the past and from tradition, and that it is ennobling to all of us to treat with respect and gratitude those who have made our lives and fortunes possible.

People your own age can be especially delightful. Perhaps you've already found one who is remarkably so. If not, don't worry, you have plenty of time, especially you young women who might do well to get those brilliant careers started first. Anyway, that one I think can take care of itself, without my help.

Related to that, but not completely so, I also wish for you children. Actual babies of your own are particularly splendid. But other people's babies--like students, junior associates, younger people whom you come to know--are all a part of the future to which we have an obligation. So I hope that soon you will find yourself becoming a mentor to someone younger and that over the course of your life you will have many opportunities to pass your own personal torches on to someone who can carry them forward for you. For those of you in the front rows who plan to go into the professoriate, this is not a hope but a certain expectation--and along with pushing back the frontiers of knowledge in your own particular field, I am sure that you will find much of life's meaning in your opportunity to work with the young.

For all of you, professional scholars or not, I hope a life of continued learning. I especially commend to you literature and history; I know you are well able to read these things, because we made you take courses to learn how. If you haven't read George Eliot's Middlemarch, now's the time to start. And HISTORY!! Well, all I can say is that if we'd all read as much history as possible--and especially of each other's history--I feel confident that some of the problems about public life that I mentioned before would be much alleviated. In any case, whatever you like to read, I hope that you always have a book open beside your bed and another beside your favorite chair and that the station in your car may ever be tuned to National Public Radio.

Finally I hope for things about your character--there's a good old fashioned word! Even if it's sometimes hard to achieve, I wish for you cheerfulness and optimism. Part of what happens in higher education is that you learn in general to be critical. You have been taught to question everything, to be skeptical about the motives of political leaders, to read for the message behind even the apparently most innocent poem, to understand the previously hidden makeup of the physical and biological world. This constant "looking behind" can have the unhealthy effect of filling you with doubt, of leading you to expect the worst from people and systems. I hope you will resist that tendency. In my experience, many people are quite decent if given half a chance. And if you have positive expectations and are then disappointed, the sad period only lasts a short while; whereas if you expect the worst, you can be miserable almost all the time. Pessimism and skepticism take a lot of energy; use that energy instead to have fun and then lick your occasional wounds only when necessary.

More generally, I hope that you already understand, cherish, and live out of some of the most fundamental old-time concepts: like integrity and duty and charity and compassion. And I hope that you continue to grow, in the Biblical words, "in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man."

So now it's time for you to do what we've all shouted so many times. It's time for you to GO. . . Bucks. Bless you. And remember that we're counting on you to be a blessing to all of us.