

OSU Commencement

December 13, 2009

Thank you, President Gee, Provost Alutto, members of the Board of Trustees, our distinguished guests and colleagues, for giving me the chance to be with you this afternoon. And thank you, graduates, for allowing me to share in this glorious day. I can't tell you honored I am to join your friends and family in congratulating you on your tremendous achievement – and to join you in thanking your parents, your spouses, your partners, and your children for the sacrifices they made on your behalf; today belongs them as much as it belongs to you. And I have to tell you, this is also a transcendent moment for those of us up on the stage, because we look out at you, arrayed in front of us, and see the extraordinary promise of this university.

President Gee sometimes calls Ohio State the University of the American Dream. I first heard him use the phrase several years ago. It struck me then, and it strikes me still, as perfect – not simply because it's got a nice ring to it but because it's true. When the revolutionary generation created this country two centuries ago, they rested the new nation on the most fragile of foundations. Not power, not privilege, not a claim to divine authority, but a single, radical idea, an idea they believed so firmly, so devoutly they wrote it into our founding document. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” they said, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” That's it: the nation's founding ideal, its most basic principle, the American dream.

Ohio State gives that dream substance. It begins with the promise of equality. There was a time when this university, like almost every other, discriminated against portions of the population. Now those days are gone. It doesn't matter whether you're black, white, Latino, Asian-American or Native American, male or female, native-born or foreign-born, gay or straight. It doesn't matter whether you're a Muslim, a Hindu, Jew, a Christian, a Buddhist, an agnostic, or an atheist; whether your parents are Wall Street investors or Wal-Mart greeters. If you're committed to academic excellence and you're willing to work hard, you're welcome here. And while you're here the university gives all of you an equal opportunity to build a meaningful, prosperous life, to pursue your happiness, as is your birthright. Look around you. Chances are the person sitting next to you or in front of you or behind you is different from you in some way or another. But in the hopes she's carried into this commencement, the ambitions she harbors, the future she wants to build for herself and her family she isn't different from you at all.

As important as it is, though, opportunity isn't enough. The revolutionary generation thought that point too fundamentally important. Yes, they dreamt of a nation whose people could aspire to be whatever they wanted to be. But they also believed passionately that the greatest aspirations weren't self-serving. Someone who took his skills and talents and turned them inward – who used them simply to make himself rich or famous -- was squandering what his country had given him. With opportunity came obligation, they insisted; with rights came responsibility. And an American's greatest responsibility, they said, was to serve the common good.

In recent decades, though, our nation's commitment to the common good has frayed. We now live with environmental degradation so great it threatens the health of the

planet. We work in an economy that, all too often, treats labor as a commodity, to be bought and sold as cheaply as possible, rather than a source of human dignity. And worst of all, in a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are equal, we are surrounded by profound inequality. Today half a million Ohioans aren't sure how they're going to put food on their tables. Today twenty percent of American children live below the poverty line -- twenty percent. Today fifty percent of the world's population -- 3.5 billion men, women and children -- struggle to make ends meet on less than two dollars a day. In the hills of southeast Ohio, on the east side of Cleveland, the mega-slums of Mumbai, and the fetid *favelas* that rise above Rio de Janeiro America's promise seems a very distant thing. We have turned our backs, it seems, on the poorest among us.

But not here. Not on this campus. We at OSU can be as self-interested as anyone; wait until we start hitting you up for donations. But in my time at Ohio State I've seen the revolutionary ideal of service fulfilled over and over again.

I think of Jennifer Fehr, who took one of my classes this time last year. Jenny had spent a summer volunteering with a development agency in Vietnam and wanted nothing more to go back as soon as she graduated. In the end she couldn't afford it. So she took a job working to promote low-income housing in Columbus' poor neighborhoods, working to make life better just a few miles from home.

A week ago I heard from another alum, Jake Nolan, who'd taken a couple of classes of mine a few years ago. These days he's a high school teacher in rural Florida, in a community dominated by families who make their living as farm laborers, among the most marginal of American workers; 80 percent of his students don't speak English at home. It's not a place where opportunity thrives. But Jake thinks it should: he wrote

because he has a terrific student in his world history course, a student he knows can do great things. But she can't afford to send herself to college. Jake was wondering whether OSU might have a way to help her out.

This past summer there were stories in the Lantern about a group of undergrads on campus who came together to stand up for the rights of factory workers in Honduras: men and women who make athletic apparel like those OSU sweats we all wear. The students didn't have any personal connections to those workers; chances are, they'll never even meet them. But they thought that they ought to be treated decently, and they believed that OSU could use its leverage to make that happen. They took their cause to President Gee, who said show me that kids on campus care about the issue. They did, building a campaign that won the support over sixty student organizations. When they took their case back to President Gee, he supported them.

Then there are two young men graduating today. Jok Dua and Bol Aweng were born in the Sudan. When they were six years old they were caught in the war that ravaged their country, forced to flee from their village, separated from their families, swept up in the great flood of refugees that are now known as the Lost Boys. All told they walked 1500 miles searching for a safe haven, travelling from Sudan to Ethiopia to a refugee camp in Kenya. For ten years they lived in that Kenyan camp, until 2001 when a resettlement program brought them to the United States. They earned associate degrees at a junior college in Nashville. Then they came to OSU, Jok to take a degree in International Studies, Bol to study digital art. As they built their new lives, they could have forgotten all about the brutal world they'd fled all those years before. But they didn't. In December 2007, after two decades away, Jok and Bol finally went back to their

home town to visit. You can just imagine how wonderful it must have been for them, to walk through a village they could remember only through the haze of terror, to embrace family members they thought they'd never see again. A visit wasn't enough, though: they wanted to do something to improve the village, to make life better for the people they'd re-discovered. So when they came back to OSU they decided that the village simply had to have a decent health care clinic – and they'd get it built. Jok and Bol have working at ever since, gradually building up the support they need, searching for donors, dedicating themselves to the people they so easily could have left behind. That's the American dream at its finest: opportunities created, obligations fulfilled.

Now it's your turn.

The truth of it is, most of us will never try to do something as challenging as Jok and Bol are doing. But when you walk out of commencement today with your diplomas tucked under your arms, you'll also carry with you talents and training that you could put to service in your communities. Imagine what might happen if those of you graduating in architecture devoted a portion of your time to designing affordable housing in the impoverished neighborhoods of Toledo or Canton. Imagine what might happen if those of you coming out of the business school devoted a portion of your time to helping food banks develop more efficient collection and distribution networks. Imagine what would happen if those you receiving degrees in economics, urban planning and education devoted some of your time to reviving the coal and steel towns of eastern Ohio. Imagine what might happen if those of you earning engineering degrees devoted some of your time to non-profits trying to develop alternative energy sources. Imagine what might happen if you new doctors, dentists and nurses devoted a portion of your time to

addressing the health care needs of our state's migrant workers. Imagine what might happen if those of you graduating in the humanities devoted your time helping the million Ohioans who are illiterate to read. Imagine what would happen if every one of you graduating today –all 2100 of you – devoted some part of yourselves to serving the common good. What a difference you could make. What a future you could fashion.

That's what makes this day so glorious for those of us up on stage. Here today you lay claim to the American dream that this university embodies. And you assume the responsibility that great accomplishment imposes: to extend the opportunity you now enjoy into those places where it doesn't yet reach; to preserve America's promise for her children and her children's children; to offer a hand to the poor and powerless, not because they're poor and powerless but because they are our equals and deserve to be treated as such; to do what you can to repair our torn social fabric; to make the world anew.

Congratulations on your graduation. We are, all of us, enormously proud of you. And we wish you the best of luck in everything you do.

Thank you.