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Meryl Streep

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UNH Commencement Address

Meryl Streep

May 24, 2003

DURHAM, N.H. – More than 2,400 graduates of the University of New Hampshire celebrated their academic accomplishments with award-winning actress Meryl Streep, who was the keynote speaker at the 133rd Commencement Saturday, May 24, 2003. Below is Streep's Commencement Address and a link to the Opening Remarks by UNH President Ann Weaver Hart.

University of New Hampshire Commencement Address

Meryl Streep

May 24, 2003

Good morning, Governor Benson, President Hart, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, proud parents and you, almost alumni. I'm very pleased to be here today to address you on this day, your last day of wearing your tassels on the left. I have agonized over this speech, mostly because I don't usually give speeches, or when I do, it's at my house, and nobody listens. I have thought long and hard about how to advise you, inspire you, thrill and excite you over multiple speakers that repeat each word-erd-erd in that sonic-onic-onic Doppler-oppler-oppler effect-ect-ect that makes you want to go to sleep-eep-eep. Meryl Streep-eep-eep put me to sleep-eep-eep. Probably quite a few of you need a great deal of sleep after all of the parties, er, studying, finals and things of Senior Spring. And if you're at all like my college age children, you're used to getting most of your sleep during daylight hours...am I right?

Because I want you not to doze, I decided I should avoid politics. Also, of course, I am in show business, and not allowed to speak about politics. Or, I'm allowed to speak, of course I'm allowed to speak, and never work again. But my problem is: I've never heard of anybody making anything but a political speech in New Hampshire. Nobody makes a speech in New Hampshire unless they're stumping for something, do they? I think it's a state law, isn't it? Your honor? If I have to, by law, make a political speech, you'll sleep. But if I make a speech about sex, you'll wake up. See, it's already working! So I'll make a speech about sexual politics, and I won't be running for anything except, perhaps, cover.

I went to school in New Hampshire 30 years ago as one of the first

women to integrate Dartmouth College. We were 60 intrepid girls on a campus of approximately 6,000 men. We tried to lead them, gently, toward a difficult idea (one that UNH has endorsed almost since its inception): the idea that women are valuable to a university. It was not as difficult as convincing the Taliban more recently of the same thing, but I do remember some pitched battles back then. Your graduation class today of nearly 3,000 students is almost 2-to-1 women, and your school is not an anomaly. This imbalance, to differing degrees, is replicated at colleges and universities around the country. In the huge University of California system, women are in a strong majority, averaging around 57 percent of the student population. According to Peterson's Guide, at NYU and Boston University, the percentage is 60-40 women to men. What's going on? And who, 30 years ago, would've ever predicted it? (Maybe the Taliban had a legitimate fear: give them an inch and they'll just take over!)

These statistics are all the more confusing when we acknowledge the fact that the glass ceiling is still in effect in the business world, the professions and politics. Imagine if the Senate were apportioned in the same way as your graduating class! Or that there were twice as many women as men in the House!? Or the White House! Or on cable news!? At the heads of Fortune 500 companies? It's almost unimaginable. You can scan the mastheads of major news organizations, the lists of the top echelons of business and management, the hierarchies of power in government, and it still reads pretty much like it did in the middle of the last century, or the century before that, or the centuries before that. In other words, it's like the membership list of the Augusta Golf Club today.

Why is there this discrepancy between how many women succeed in college and where they actually end up? What happens to all these people after graduation? Back in 1970 we thought that if we had access to the same educational opportunities as men, then the same opportunities would naturally present themselves out in the Real World. We've more than crashed through the first, the educational barrier, but the other is proving tougher to go up against. It may seem as if universities are optimistically and successfully preparing an unprecedented number of female students for leadership opportunities that don't exist. Many women will confront the attitude of top PGA golfer Vijay Singh when he declared he would rather quit the tournament than play alongside the top-ranked woman in the country. At the highest levels of achievement some men still find humiliation in competing (and potentially coming up short) against women. Why does it hurt more to lose to a girl, unless, deep down, you think girls are worth less than boys? This is an old and deep seated and in many cases unconscious prejudice; you can circle the globe and find its gnarly roots wrapped around the foundations of many societies. And

just like any other prejudice, cultural or racial, it'll take a long time for it to die out. But shrivel it will, because it's basically a negative, regressive, underground impulse that cannot live in the light of a new day. As we continue to see, societies that look backward and keep their women down fail to keep pace in the modern world. We know for our own 80-year battle to claim our rights that the Founding Fathers weren't thinking of women when they wrote the concept of freedom into our Constitution. But you could argue that part of the reason that the West has sustained its ascendancy is due to the exponentially expanding opportunities offered ALL of its citizens.

You, the gentlemen of the graduating class, have experienced life on campus as members of the minority. I hope they didn't give you too hard a time. At least this may have given you an appreciation for the importance of preserving the rights of the few; Democracy is devoted to the idea that everyone, not just the majority, deserves a voice. My brothers were taught as boys to open the door for the ladies, a practice they were happy to forget about in the advent of the Women's Movement. At the leadership level now, however, chivalry of a new sort is called for. I hope when you encounter the success you deserve, and the discrepancy I have talked about, you will respond with speed and grace. The door should be opened for the ladies, the boardroom door, and our gentlemen will have to do it. We all need to be given opportunities, and then we have to disregard all of the statistics that predict we're not likely to reach our goal. Success is often provided by the exception to the Rules for Success. People who have broken through color and gender lines, class and cultural bias, have done so despite an array of reasons as to why they shouldn't be able to do so. In this way, success may ultimately have more to do with your own personality, focus, and optimism than your gender, race or background. Put blinders on to those things that conspire to hold you back, especially the ones in your own head. Guard your good mood. Listen to music every day, joke, and love and read more for fun especially poetry.

And now I'm going to read you a poem, because I believe that every solemn, joyous, tedious and important rite of passage should and must be celebrated and elevated by poetry. This is "Begin," by Brendan Kennelly.

Begin again to the summoning birds
to the sight of light at the window,
begin to the roar of morning traffic
all along Pembroke Road.
Every beginning is a promise
born in light and dying in dark
determination and exaltation of springtime

flowering the way to work.
Begin to the pageant of queuing girls
the arrogant loneliness of swans in the canal
bridges linking the past and the future
old friends passing though with us still.
Begin to the loneliness that cannot end
since it perhaps is what makes us begin,
begin to wonder at unknown faces
at crying birds in the sudden rain
at branches stark in the willing sunlight
at seagulls foraging for bread
at couples sharing a sunny secret
alone together while making good.
Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
that always seems about to give in
something that will not acknowledge conclusion
insists that we forever begin.

And lastly, as to the whole sad thing with the Old Man of the Mountain; 200 years ago, Daniel Webster remarked of the rocky crag: "God has hung out a sign to show that in New England he makes Men." I say, "Hmmm...maybe God is changing the sign..."

The mountains may crumble
Gibraltar may crumble
They're only made of clay, But-
Our love is here—to stay!

I speak for all here who send you out into your future with love,
respect for your hard work, and high happy hopes for each and every
one of you. Good luck, and thank you.

[Opening Remarks by UNH President Ann Weaver Hart](#)

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