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# 1989 Commencement Address: Bryant Gumbel

Bryant Gumbel

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# 1989 Commencement Address

Bryant Gumbel, Host of NBC's Today Show

President Brooks, Chairman Brogan, Your Excellencies Bishop Harrington, Bishop Flanagan, Vice Chairman Gibbons and members of the Board of Trustees, Bishop Burke, Msgr. McManus and distinguished honorees, graduates of the class of '89, assembled family and friends, good morning.

This is a joyous occasion and I thank you for the chance to be a part of it. With the degree, you do me great honor. It is at once humbling and comforting to find the work you do is enjoyed and/or appreciated by others. And trust me - the need to continue to justify your high opinion is not a responsibility that I take very lightly. I thank you very much.

I thank you too for the chance to be in Worcester. Having started my day in San Diego, I moved in here under cover of darkness and I considered finishing my night in Algiers, but it was closed and so was Sh-Boom, so I'll have to come back.

I have seen in the newspaper that I'm part of a broad assemblage speaking on university and college campuses this spring. The variety of politicians, businessmen, celebrities, entertainers is such that it includes everyone from George Bush to Ralph Nader, from Barbara Walters to Barbara Jordan, and when you consider the massive number of options involved and you're put in the position I am, you're always forced to ask why me? Well, despite what you may have read, I am not so self centered as to think that I possess some unique wisdom. And I certainly don't believe you couldn't have had someone else. Nor, it might surprise you to learn, do I think that I'm particularly good at this.

Fact of the matter is, recent history would suggest I'm not. When last I did one of these, I got in a receiving line when I was done and I found myself greeting well-wishers as they passed by in single file and I stood shaking hands next to the school's president. And as I did a young man passed and he shook my hand and he said, Mr. Gumbel, you slurred your words. I said, thank you very much. And he moved on only to reappear a few moments later. This time as he shook my hand, he said, Mr. Gumbel, your speech missed the point. Again I kind of nodded and he moved on. A couple moments later, he appeared a third time only this time he said, Mr. Gumbel, your speech was too long, and as he moved away this time I couldn't help myself, so I asked my host standing next to him what the hell his problem was. And he said, oh don't mind him, he only repeats what everyone else is saying.

So I ask you to relax for a moment. I promise not to keep any of you too long. I am not one of those who believe that commencement speeches are designed to make sure that graduates go into the world properly sedated. The fact is it has been only 20 years since I sat on your side of the podium. I remember that day and I remember feeling restless and anxious, anxious to put the final touches on my formal education. Thinking more frankly about the post-ceremony parties than anything else. And fearing to the very end that my diploma might somehow be withheld by a professor who demanded a recount. I remember thinking too about the years of college I'd lived through and how much more pleasant they seem than the years that were ahead of me. Somehow the trade-off of freedom for responsibility didn't particularly excite me and frankly I thought the prospect of being a contributor much more foreboding than being strictly a consumer.

My guess is that if you're like the person sitting next to you this morning, you're up to your tailbone in some rather uncomfortable questions. Will I find a job, what am I qualified to do, what's expected of me, how am I going to measure up, and what do I really want to do? Those are all questions you have a right to ask and that I wish I could answer for you. But there are no ready answers and the 20 minutes I plan to stand here, I can't solve riddles that I guarantee will plague you for years to come, so I won't even try.

What I would like to do this morning is accomplish three things. First, to join in the celebration of your accomplishment. Second, to try to put what you've done and might yet do in some kind of perspective. And third, attempt to communicate to you a sense of what those of us who salute you today expect of you and hope for you from this day forward.

Let's start with the celebration of your achievement in the proper perspective. Whether or not you appreciate your degree yet, your accomplishment is considerable. For openers, you've got a degree. Even in these days of higher education across the blue board, your diploma still says something. In obvious truth, it singles you out as part of only 20 percent of all Americans who reach your level of schooling. It stamps you as something special, a part of a privileged minority. Beyond the obvious, it says something too about who you are and what you're capable of doing. You know the old car joke. When I started school I couldn't even spell graduate and now I am one.

Well, it still draws a smile, but it's distant from fact. Fact is your diploma is in actuality a symbol of your ability to earn that diploma. Nobody's giving you anything today. What you take from here you have earned with a considerable degree of talent and determination. I want you to applaud yourself from this day forward for earning something of real value to you and the world in which you live. Whatever thousands of dollars it cost pale in comparison to the human toll it's already demanded of you. And better yet, from this day forward that toll recognizes no grades. If you've got good ones, terrific. I applaud you. If not, today marks the start of a new slate.

But a lot of us C+ students have learned that the myth that your grades will follow you forever is only that, a myth. The world is full of citizens of worth and of wealth who had 2.0 grade point averages. You will find the world is not inclined to judge your intelligence by the strength of your grades, rather most will view your diploma as an indication that you possess intelligence. It's greatest worth may be as a constant reminder to you of what you're capable of. A certified reminder of your intelligence, your curiosity, your perseverance. It indicates what you're about and arms you with a formidable weapon with which to battle your future.

You're armed too with the force of youth. You may think that a tired cliché and pooh-pooh the idea now but later will, I guarantee you, come to appreciate it. For youth is not, as Shaw once suggested, wasted on the young, but only undervalued by those who don't recognize that it's worth something. You're at that point in your life where a mistake isn't a final note, where one error generally won't spoil a dream. Your youth provides you the chance to fail if necessary and the time to be uncertain. You may be very anxious this day to rush up on your future but your youth guarantees you the luxury that at least your future won't rush up on you.

Remember the movie "The Raider's of the Lost Ark," when Harrison Ford and Indiana Jones ran into a former girlfriend and they spoke of how long they had been apart. When she told him he looked bad for his age he noted that it was the mileage, not the year. It was a good line then, only it's better now because it's true. It's not the years that too often dull the spirit but rather the collective experience and the disappointment of those years.

Now if you're as smart as I think you are you should be muttering, hey that's easy for Bryant Gumbel to say, he's got his. That's okay. I accept that. But let me also tell you that I stand before you as a guy who got into what he's doing only after trying two other things that didn't work out. That I wound up in this only after majoring in Russian History and ducking out of law school. That I stand before you a guy who sat at his own graduation with a 2.6 average and more of a reputation for good-timing than hard-driving ambition. And I tell you all that not to suggest that Bryant Gumbel is somehow special but instead as evidence that your future is yours to shape with a recognition of self-worth and a very strong dose of self-confidence.

I mentioned expectations a bit earlier. Today they are all around you. And the parents who gave so much and whose hopes and dreams you carry with you and the friends who applaud you and admire the work that's brought you to this moment and the educators who helped you and understand the efforts you've made, willingly or not, you can carry from here their expectations of what you can do with your future. And I will suggest their expectations do mean a lot, but frankly I'd rather address yours and what you'll ask of yourself. It's been said that anyone who knows how much he's worth, ain't worth much. Well, years from now - I'm curious - how are you going to measure your own worth? Will it be totaled on a ledger, written in black and white, punctuated with a dollar sign, will it be documented in a newspaper, broadcast on the airwaves, a mark of fame or of notoriety in a world that blurs the distinction between the two? Or will your worth live on - in the betterment of something or someone else; perhaps a cause, perhaps a child.

Today you leave the comfort and the safety of Holy Cross and you enter a world that is brimming with ills. Frankly, you deserve better but deserve it or not the past is prolog. And the ills of the world? They're part of your world. Surely you can try to ignore them. It is possible and many have tried and they worked hard to do just that, but strangely enough ignoring them won't make your life any better and it will make your world definitely much worse.

In case you haven't heard, the me-first era is over. It lasted two terms and it's done. Conspicuous consumption is no longer in, nor is turning your back on others or getting yours at any cost. Deficit spending is passé in fiscal and social terms. Now, thankfully, you pay as you go. Values are in and so is caring and involvement. And surely we've no shortage of causes, urban decay, plight of the homeless, surge of racism, the plague of drugs, the environment, our abortion divisions, acid rain, the greenhouse effect, teen pregnancy, teen suicide, the scourge of AIDS, long-term health care, the state of education, the arms race, third world poverty - the list goes on and on and on and surely one of those problems must interest you.

And if you don't attack it, who will? The guy who doesn't have your smarts, the woman who doesn't have your depth, those who haven't tasted society's blessings as you have. Maybe you dream of leaving it to people more qualified. Well, let me let you in on something. Of course, people aren't born, they are made and they are made of the same fears and insecurities as you and the person next to you. I don't know about you, but I grew up thinking such people, the famous, the strong, the caring, the dedicated, the involved, were somehow inherently better than I was. I grew up thinking them smarter, or wittier, or luckier or harder working than I ever thought I'd be. What I've learned instead from daily on-air encounters is that those who influenced my life most do so because they want to and because they dare to. They're the people you speak of and read of every day. They are players and they matter. In most cases they've no more smarts than you. They're no less ambitious, have no more free time, and they're just as selfish. But ultimately, they make the decision to be more than just a spectator in the game of life. They have graduated to more than that.

You look up the word graduation in one of Mr. Webster's better volumes and you'll find several definitions there. One says to grant an academic degree or diploma. A second reads to change gradually. And a third means to pass from one stage of experience, proficiency or prestige to a higher level. And that last one is what this day is all about. You are being asked to graduate today to accept the next stage of your life. To become more proficient, to have more prestige and to live up to the responsibility that comes with your degree.

Look, according to the old song, It's a Big Wide Wonderful World We Live In, and I won't dispute that but it's getting smaller day by day. And its complications are such that it's wonderful only if you help it along. And that's not as easy as it sounds. You will find as you go that being involved means taking some hits from people who say hosannas to your principles until those principles collide with their backdoor. They'll tell you honesty is great until you tell them an unpleasant truth. They'll applaud your courage until it creates discomfort for them. They'll salute your loyalty until it's mistaken for acceptance for anything they do. And they'll praise your pride until it out-distances their own.

Be an empty glad-hander and you'll find that everyone's your friend. Get involved. Do what's right. Be committed and ultimately the small, the ignorant, the petty, the envious, they'll try to reduce you. It's not a pleasant prospect but it is much more attractive than joining their ranks without ever coming to bat. Live your life with a purpose beyond yourself and the world's as bold and as broad as your interests are. Live it only for yourself and its limits will always be at arms length. And if I've one wish for you today it's that you could understand how empty that kind of life eventually is.

Look, I know this all sounds terribly Polyanna-ish. I don't mean it to. Lord knows all of us offering the advice have logged more mistakes and sins than we pray you ever will. But life's a funny game. You appreciate it fully only when half of it's gone. You gain patience only after you've burned some bridges. You get perspective only after you've lost your way. At this stage it does no real good for me or your parents or your teachers to tell you how to live your lives. You will quite simply do as you please. And we who join you today applaud you for that. You've earned the right to try and, if necessary, you deserve the chance to fail. Those here have done all they can for you. I hope you know all of that and that you are properly grateful for what they've done. It's your turn now. Good luck, be careful and God bless you.