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Random and Spontaneous

Remarks to the Class of 2015

By Keynote Speaker Eric Schlosser

May 17, 2015

Thank you, it's a real honor to be speaking here today.

Class of 2015, this is the last lecture that you will ever have to sit through at Connecticut College. I will do my best to say something interesting--and keep it brief.

Today is a happy day, a day to celebrate your achievements, your making it to the finish line. So today I'm not going to talk too much about my work. A commencement speech that dwells too long on prisons, factory farms, and nuclear weapons would kill the mood. But I am going to speak about a common theme that runs through all of my work: the systems of control, visible and invisible, that surround us, threaten us, diminish us. And I'm going to end by talking about a totally opposite set of values, the values that literally brought me here today--the random and spontaneous, the irrational and impulsive, the letting go of the need for control. And the message I want to leave you with is simple. Sometimes the best things in life make no sense.

Let me explain.

Class of 2015, you have been bombarded, practically since birth, with more clever marketing than any other generation in human history. You can't escape it. Everywhere you look, someone is trying to sell you something. And you have been programmed to succeed, from an early age, to an unprecedented degree. My kids had to take standardized tests in nursery school to see if they could get into the right kindergarten.

The logic of these systems becomes internalized--the pressure to advance, the competition with your friends, the numeric measures of success. The linear, unstoppable momentum that leads you from pre-school to grad school.

Meanwhile, the external systems of control in this country have become more powerful and more sophisticated than ever before. The ability to read your mail and listen to your phone calls, to track your purchases and anticipate your viewing habits. Our corporations have never been bigger. Our mass media has never been more centralized, more docile, more toothless. Our films have never been more soulless and test-marketed and predictable. Today the playlists and pop songs on the radio are being selected by computer algorithms. How else can you explain Justin Bieber?

But all these systems of control are ultimately fallible--because they were created by fallible and flawed human beings. The prisons and jails built to impose social control, filled with more than two million of our fellow citizens, are now producing riots and social disorder. The chickens bred to be a uniform size and fed antibiotics and kept indoors their entire lives, for reasons of profit and efficiency, are now dying off from

avian diseases. The nuclear weapons built to protect us can destroy us, in an instant, because of a software glitch, a short circuit, a lunatic with the right launch code.

The perfect system of control is an impossibility, thank god. All of them are vulnerable and prone to error. As the great Leonard Cohen put it, "There is a crack, a crack in everything--that's how the light gets in."

As for the random and spontaneous and instinctive, the need sometimes to defy logic, let me finish by telling you a story.

In the fall of 1947, a mother and her seventeen-year-old daughter were driving from New London to Westchester. The daughter was applying to Connecticut College. She'd just had her interview on campus, and they were heading home.

As they drove through New Haven, they spotted a hitchhiker by the side of the road. He was young and handsome. The mother and daughter made an impetuous, spur of the moment decision. They stopped to give the hitchhiker a ride.

It turned out that the young man was applying to Yale Law School--and had just finished *his* interview on campus. The young man and the young woman made a deal: if he got into Yale and she got into Connecticut College, they'd go out on a date.

A year later, he started his first semester at Yale. He called Connecticut College and found her there. She'd gotten in, too. They made a plan to go out one night and arranged a blind date for their friends. On December 4th, 1948, the young man showed up at Connecticut College with a friend--my father. The young woman brought along a friend of hers that night--my mother.

That's how my parents met, on this campus, almost 67 years ago. My father walked into Freeman Hall, saw my mother across the room, walked right up to her and said, "You must be my date."

They have been together ever since. They are sitting in the audience today. I hope you will give them a round of applause. And now I hope you will give a round of applause to every other parent and grandparent here today. They have earned your applause, they deserve it.

I would not be standing here today if that mother and her daughter had driven past that hitchhiker in New Haven--like they probably should have. I mean, what were they thinking? That was insane.

Every single one of us is here right now for reasons that are random and spontaneous, thoroughly mysterious--and, ultimately, wonderful. Today is a great day.

Class of 2015, I hope every single one of you can break free of the programming, defy expectations, resist the urge to control other people, show compassion to those less fortunate than yourself, find something you love doing, find someone you can love for sixty-seven years.

I wish all of you good luck.

(Remarks as prepared by Eric Schlosser.)