

Longwood University Commencement Address

May 12, 2007

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Introduction

Education's purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one.¹

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?²

[Thank you President Cormier, Rector Adams and the Board of Visitors of Longwood University; Vice-President McWee, Deans, and Distinguished Faculty, graduating seniors and your families, parents, spouses, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, grand and great grand-parents, and honorees, guests, friends, staff, aides-de-camp, boy friends, girl friends, and sundry other well-wishers: greetings]

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Outline

A tasty commencement address is a graduation cake. The bottom layer is an opportunity to “point with pride.” The upper layer is “view with alarm.” The icing is a buttery spread of sage advice. Together, we shall eat this cake as quickly as possible.

Commencement addresses are hard—as a genre, commencement talks are often the most forgettable part of graduation day. “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here...”³ Besides, everyone is wearing a funny hat.

The talk competes for attention with this ancient ceremony, this day of great personal exaltation, this convocation of friends and family, all celebrating completion and new beginnings.

With good fortune and hard work, you have completed exams, and mom and dad have sent the last college care package. They will soon (hopefully!) complete paying your tuition bill.

¹ Ralph Hodgson, On ESP.

² NRS Proverbs 8:1

³ Abraham Lincoln. Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. November 19, 1863.

Point with pride

So let's get underway with the first layer of the cake. It is a joy to point with pride, as you do today, at Longwood University and how it has transformed us.

168 years after its founding, this college of small beginnings is realizing a great destiny. In this 231st year of the Commonwealth, Virginia's *first Institution of Higher Education for women* remains true to its roots, but, it has grown to include men, and other academic disciplines with three distinctive colleges and a growing graduate division.

True to its calling, Longwood University is one of a double handful of U.S. universities that actively promote and foster "student success."

Longwood, the only university with a patron saint, is your *alma mater*.

Yes, I been taken on a tour of Joanie-on-the-pony and Joanie-on-the-stoney.

Longwood is also my new home and my new *nourishing mother*. We can all take pride today in our links with Longwood.

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View with alarm

Let's look at the second layer of cake—to view with alarm. Each of you, regardless of your chosen profession, will become a teacher and mentor to both adults and children. There are few callings so distinctly noble, and few endeavors so richly rewarding.

Recent years have brought a new challenge to teaching and mentoring for us all. Your predecessors in these celebratory seats left Longwood to join a world they understood—a world whose future they could predict for those they taught and mentored; a culture of great familiarity and continuity.

You and I, by contrast, cannot foresee or comprehend the world in which our children and grandchildren will live and work.

As computer costs plummet exponentially, new and exciting technological and medical innovations will be the result. Custom-tailored medicines;

greatly extended life spans; a nano-technology planet with ultra-miniaturized machines, smaller than red blood cells; implanted human memory chips—truly an extraordinary world of rapid, profound changes and startling discontinuities.

As leaders and role models, you must prepare those who follow for a world you cannot see or forecast. This demands your utmost skill, attention, and dedication—to inspire a sense of life-long learning in others, as you have acquired that sense during your journey here.

I wish you success in meeting this challenge.

Sage advice

The icing on the cake is to pass along a little sage advice—a taste of my own value system. In a sound-bite society, every word counts. If these tidbits were a text message, I would send you five items of two words each—a mere ten words in all.

First, Worship God.

Ancient proverbs say: The way of the LORD is strength to the upright⁴, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.⁵

Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee.⁶

The world around us has abundant signals. The signs are both natural and external and personal and internal. The signs say ...

- there is more to our universe than science can understand,
- there is more to our humanity than what we can observe;
- there is more to our needs than food and drink can satisfy.

“Some things [just] have to be believed to be seen.”⁷

However you picture Her and in whatever form, Worship God.

⁴ Proverbs 10:29

⁵ NRS Proverbs 9:10

⁶ KJV Job 22:21

⁷ Ralph Hodgson

Second, cherish family.

Your family, by blood, by marriage, and by adoption are the dearest people on the planet. Do not leave this lawn to abandon them for a new life and new career. Continue to make them a daily part of who you are and what you do.

Furthermore, your closest friends are now part of your family. You chose each other. Cherish them as well. Call; write; eat together; Connect by Skype™ or Yahoo™ for a video-conference. Check up on them.

Also, in a strange inversion of life cycle, you who were cherished as infants by your parents, will become caretakers for them as they age into infancy.

Savor the labor, savor the love. Cherish family.

Third, Enjoy work.

From now until the end of your life, you will spend an incredible 135,000 hours working.⁸

Enjoy it. Make a contribution. Work with people you like and admire.

Shun poisonous personalities and mind-numbing tedium.

Enjoy work

Fourth, give back.

Give back to community and give back to profession.

Anne Frank said, “No one has ever become poor by giving.”

Einstein believed, “It is every man's obligation to put back into the world at least the equivalent of what he takes out of it.”⁹

⁸ 55 hours per week x 49 weeks per year x 50 years = 134,750 hours

⁹ Albert Einstein

Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?”¹⁰

The greatest gift is a portion of [yourself] thyself.¹¹ Give back.

Fifth, act now.

Take action today to give, to vote, to decide, to stop global warming, to change public education, to take the next personal life step—act now.

During WWII Churchill often added this note to his memos: “Action this day!” He said, “I never worry about action, but only about inaction.”¹²

[slow tempo]

I share your sense of loss for Ed Cunningham and his friend Byron Jamerson, tragically lost in fire here just two months ago.

I also join in your praise and recognition for Timothy Cocrane, who saw the fire and acted immediately. He saved Samantha Fulton, Daniel Yates, Jr. and Scott Freer.

You can also recognize the meaning of “act now” in the actions of our President Patricia Cormier. She immediately praised Timothy’s bravery, and said, “When he comes back, he will not be paying tuition. We will take care of him. His praises should be sung to the hills.”¹³ Amen.

Act now!

Conclusion

There you have it in Ten words:

Worship God. Cherish family. Enjoy work. Give back. Act now!

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr. http://www.appleseeds.org/Jan_05.htm

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Gifts* (essay)

¹² Winston Churchill http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/winston_churchill.html

¹³ Richmond Times-Dispatch, March 5, 2007

We have eaten our cake together—pride, alarm, and advice.

In closing, I encourage you to act now to soak in all this around you.

Family hugs, friends faces, celebrations, arcane ritual, ancient regalia, and rites of passage. *Carpe Diem*—pluck the day.¹⁴

My highest admiration and sincerest best wishes go with you,
the Longwood University Class of 2007!

Thank you for sharing your day with me!

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¹⁴ Quintus Horatius Flaccus *Odes* 1.11