

2015 Cornell College Commencement Address

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Today we aren't just celebrating knowledge -- although, I see you all finally brought your party hats. Today, we celebrate the institution (who we are and what we do), and more importantly, we celebrate you. It is a great honor to have been chosen by the class to give this speech. I am touched and humbled more than ever before; on a day when you should be receiving graduation gifts, you have managed to give one to me. Thank you. But as great as this is, it has been an even greater honor to have had the opportunity to teach you these four years; and for that I thank not only you again but also your parents. Thank you for commending your daughters and sons to us.

When Lucius the protagonist of Apuleius' Roman comic novel *The Metamorphoses* embarks on a journey that will prove to be nothing less than transformative in more ways than one, he carries with him a letter of introduction that he presents to a man named Milo, who would be his host. We learn that Lucius and Milo share an acquaintance who has vouched-safe for Lucius - and informed Milo of the young man's character, his family, his education, his accomplishments, and bright prospects while asking Milo's assistance on behalf of Lucius. Documentary texts (as well as rhetorical manuals with instructions on how to write a proper letter of introduction) reveal that the exchange of letters introducing or recommending a traveler to a colleague, family member, or acquaintance at a distance was an important element of travel and social life, and more than literary anecdote; in the ancient world, when people undertook a journey - momentous or mundane - they often did so armed with letters of recommendation or introduction that spoke to personal qualities and traits such as someone's trustworthiness, character, intellectual acumen, (one of the favorite ones I ran into recently professed a merchant's trustworthiness because prior to going into business, he had, after all been a philosopher). From a practical standpoint, these letters were important because they sought to solidify and renew social networks, to secure favors and privileges, and to take care of friends and loved ones.

Like Lucius, you all are about to set out and begin the next phases of your lives and careers. Commencement, after all, is a word that has more to do with beginnings than endings, and today we celebrate those as well. Perhaps this is entirely appropriate because as philosophers like Aristotle and, of course, Semisonic have reminded us more recently in song: every new beginning does, in fact, come from some other beginning's end. Your journey is not ending but starting again - some of you will begin a new job, others will travel, or start graduate school, or return home, or undertake internships or fellowships, or pursue myriad and sundry passions nurtured over the course of your college careers. But you're not quite ready to leave just yet - in keeping with the ancient and medieval foundations upon which academic institutions like this one are built --- you need a letter.

Luckily, the letter of recommendation has remained a mainstay of academic communication and discourse. You might say that it is a sacred tradition of sorts. Each year my colleagues and I write many; as a group I'm sure a letter has been written on behalf of nearly each and every one of you graduating today. But very rarely are letters shared with those on whose behalf they are written; and although the rules and decorum of professional development demand secrecy and confidentiality in the various hiring and application processes you have experienced, there is something lost here - namely, the chance to tell you all the magnitude of your accomplishments, how much you have mattered, how you have changed the hilltop by your very presence, and how we hope - and trust - that you will continue to do the extraordinary things that we have witnessed and grown accustomed during your time with us.

Academic colleagues, however, do sometimes share the letters we write for each other. Over the years I have taken to sharing the letters I have written for my students. Around this time of year I print them out on letterhead. I sign and seal them as tradition dictates. And I give them to my soon to be former students as they leave as a graduation gift on the assumption that, as of today, though I never considered you anything but, we are officially colleagues.

As you begin a new journey and leave the homes you have created for yourselves here on campus, it is important to take stock of what you have done; how you have made this place sacred and special; perpetuated who we are and helped craft anew what it means to be a part of Cornell College; and I thought that there was no better way to commence and commend you to the world beyond the hilltop than with a letter of recommendation for the class of 2015. So if you'll allow me some creative license...

I write in enthusiastic and overwhelming support of the students assembled here [letters always start off with something like this]. They have shown themselves to be exceptional students inside the classroom and beyond, the sort who possess the insatiable intellectual curiosity and creativity we seek to cultivate and instill, who pursue their passions fearlessly, and who, I trust, will remain the engaged citizens and community members that they have become. Their recent work on capstone experiences and senior theses (projects that probed the “Politics of Flooding” in ancient Rome, that examined fundamental questions regarding how we form, and change, our opinions, or that brought the interpretive tools of the social sciences to bear on the “Psychology of Plague in antiquity,”); or on student symposium presentations that investigated Aztec tombs through 3D imaging and digital archaeology and explored conservation systems in Madagascar; or their work on senior art shows where you helped us remember that there are, in fact, no mistakes in jazz, is proof enough of these qualities. But, you can certainly go deeper.

You can look at how our students approach their education and see how they have decided to pursue a liberal arts degree. Among numerous examples, I mention a course I teach from time-to-time: Egypt After the Pyramids. In this course students from diverse academic backgrounds (economics, international relations, archaeology, english, politics, psychology, classics, geology, sociology and anthropology, and Biology and Biochemistry) brought their disciplinary and personal perspective to the doing of social, political, cultural and economic history of the ancient world. To complete their final projects (and indeed throughout the course) I asked them to learn how to work with and ask questions of what was a whole new set of material for most if not all of them: papyri and ostraca, documents composed on papyrus and pieces of broken pottery -- collections of contracts, receipts, letters, petitions, accounts, leases, business and personal documents -- and to craft their own research questions focused on what these texts reveal about life in Egypt under Roman rule. As always, they did not disappoint. Students analyzed incidents of and the meaning attached to violence; examined how people navigated social and political hierarchies; probed economic strategies used by farmers, merchants, and craftsmen; investigated taxation and control of a population or lack thereof. Thoroughly modern questions all, and they used the ancient world as their laboratory, so to speak, to hypothesize and propose answers to their questions. Because of classes like this, I know a symposium or capstone project, therefore, represents the culmination not just of a single class or of your senior year but of a Cornell career, one spent preparing to ask and answer different questions, and not necessarily specific to a single discipline.

In other words, our students are academic risk takers in all the right ways. Each month these students have pushed themselves out of their comfort zones in an attempt to think within and across disciplines (not necessarily because the curriculum demands it but because their intellectual curiosity does). What they have done in Egypt After the Pyramids is a microcosm of what they have done day-in and day-out, One-Course-At-A-Time for 4 years: complete a rigorous course of study in the liberal arts consisting of the sciences, humanities, fine arts, and social sciences. They have done this, I think, not so much to master discrete bodies of knowledge (though plenty is accumulated along the way) but to learn how to ask questions, the right questions, rather than find the right answers. Their work stands as a reminder, too, that the liberal arts are not a body of knowledge in and of itself, but a method of inquiry and an approach to knowledge acquisition.

In that vein, perhaps more importantly, and provocatively, our students, whether they realize it or not, have become more comfortable with not knowing - or figuring out what they don't know in a particular situation, what they need to know in order to take action and make decisions, and how to apply what they have learned in a reasoned, measured, analytical, and creative way. The importance of such a quality may be understated at a time when information is readily, and thankfully, available. But nothing can be more true to the Socratic traditions of liberal arts education or more necessary at any time and place. Socrates (and Plato) turned a simple profession of ignorance - Socrates had famously pronounced that the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing - into a system of inquiry through which he questioned the foundations of knowledge, preconceived notions, opinions, and in short the social, political, and natural world that surrounds us (and forced everyone else to do the same); he found answers not through lecture but through dialogue, experiment, and by engaging those with different opinions. So will our students. Their attention to and desire to ask questions has prepared them not only for what comes next, but any and all next steps.

Cornell students have not only learned how to tackle complex problems with critical reflection, but also with creativity. Sociologist

Richard Sennett examined the connection between the head and the hand in his philosophically inclined book *The Craftsman* and laments its loss. Sennett, who professes his own craft to be as much music as sociology and writing, explains that losing this connection is dangerous; for Sennett, separating the head and the hand is problematic and impairs “both understanding and expression” (p.20). I can say that our students have not lost the connection and rather celebrate the fact that thinking is doing, across the curriculum, inside and outside of the classroom. Our students have painted, sculpted, performed (sometimes with puppets), built sets -- # students involved in a performance group of some sort -- but you’ve also built robots and studied interactions between man and machine; you’ve designed experiments and studied coral reefs in the Bahamas; you’ve contributed to and helped produce our literary journal *Open Field*; and you’ve analyzed stalagmites from Portugal to understand climate change.

Letters next turn towards evidence of success beyond the classroom; evidence of applying what you have learned in the classroom in your co-curriculars and vice versa. Here I continue to find nothing but commitment to the community and engaged citizenship. I never worry that our students will be bowling alone to use Robert Putnam’s phrase. As far as I can tell, our students belonged to each and every one of the 85 or so student groups we have on campus; they also participated in nationally recognized civic engagement and community service opportunities like alternative spring break (and, now, winter break); they were lunch buddies; 325 students competed in 19 sports this year; they won another volleyball conference title and finished ranked 20th in the coaches’ poll; and they can mock trial with the best of them after reaching the national finals (again). That being said, I only rarely have to remind our students that they had to make time for reading Hesiod and Herodotus or figuring out what really happened with that volcanic eruption at Akrotiri in the 16th century BCE. To understand the Cornell experience is to understand the exceptional devotion to their studies and their co-curriculars. And they pull it off with aplomb. Our students have led; they have set examples; and they have inspired. These experiences have made them extraordinary students and will make them extraordinary citizens and colleagues going forward.

Of the character, collegiality, and kindness of Cornell students I not only can offer what I see on a daily basis in class and several anecdotes from my own experiences here when it is clear that our students get to know us as well as we get to know them. Thanks in part no doubt to the power of OCAAT, each class becomes a close knit group. I have known you to be kind and considerate and to show what I can best describe as an attentive concern for each other and each other’s opinions, thoughts, and ideas in class; I have seen you collaborate on projects and workshop ideas with compassion; I have also seen you have a lot of fun - serious silliness as we say around here. I for one knew that Cornell College might be the place for me when, as a job candidate, I saw one of the most glorious sights I have ever seen: not a conventional snow man, but a Jabba the Hutt snow man. Again - showing that our students take the all important connection between head and hand seriously.

My anecdotal evidence, I think, supports these generalities. My father became ill as my second year here at Cornell began. When he passed away later on that spring, I was away from Campus for a bit. The first day I returned to campus, I had wandered down the hall to talk to a colleague. When I walked back to my office I found my students waiting for me with a care package including the original Clash of the Titans released in 1981 (with Harry Hamlin, Sir Laurence Olivier, and Dame Maggie Smith – Professor McGonnagal herself, of course), Star Wars Legos, and not a condolence card, but a condolence ostrakon - a piece of broken pottery signed by all of them. It was not unlike -- they told me -- the papyri and ostraca I spend my academic life studying. In that one gesture - they not only mourned with me, they showed that they had invested in me as much as we all invest in them.

One further anecdote furthers my case. My wife and I joined a group of students who had come to see Timon of Athens (played by Ian McDiarmid, Emperor Palpatine himself) at Chicago Shakespeare several years ago. After the play ended, we commiserated in the lobby and then parted ways. By the time we got to our car, I had missed a call and had a detailed voicemail from them. Apparently, I had also missed Emperor Palpatine. He actually had come out, posed for pictures, and talked to the group that night - a group that included a few of you here today. The next part of the story takes place several weeks later and ends with all of you wondering how my students keep getting into my office. I came to my office one morning towards the end of the year and found a note and the playbill they had him autograph for me - which like the ostrakon is still in my office too. More than a statement that you can trust Cornell students -- how many

college students break into an office not to take stuff but leave gifts ??? -- it reveals that you can trust them to invest in the people in their lives, in their work places, and in their communities.

For these and other reasons - I trust that our students will continue to thrive, to question, to wonder, to find answers, to make connections, to invest in others, and to make a difference in their communities as much as they have made here.

But I can't end an address the same way I would end a letter. So a final charge. As you leave us, remember - you always have a home here on the hilltop - and I expect to see you all often as you continue to help us steward our college as alumni. I ask only a few things in return: that you treat life like a text (or a problem set, a piece of music, or a work of art), and always read deeply, enjoy it, let yourself linger over passages that move you, and approach it critically and creatively, with an eye to asking questions, and being open for a myriad of answers.

Congratulations class of 2015 -- you guys are the best.